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CONVERSATIONS WITH ELMER BISCHOFF

"Two Conversations with Elmer Bischoff"  
Interviewed 1990 by Suzanne B. Riess  
Regional Oral History Office

and

"Interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff"  
Interviewed 1977 by Paul J. Karlstrom  
Archives of American Art





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## Cataloging Information

BISCHOFF, Elmer Nelson (1916-1991)

Artist

Two Conversations with Elmer Bischoff, 1991, ii, 48 pp.

UC Berkeley Department of Art, 1960s, 1970s; the Hans Hofmann influence; thoughts on the Breakfast Group and studio critiques; "Figure with Tree," 1972; thoughts on problems and pitfalls in painting. Volume includes an interview with Bischoff conducted in 1976 by Paul J. Karlstrom of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Appended resume and reviews.

Interviewed 1990 by Suzanne B. Riess. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Elmer Bischoff

TWO CONVERSATIONS WITH ELMER BISCHOFF

Interviews Conducted by  
Suzanne B. Riess  
in 1990



Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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## INTERVIEW HISTORY

The Regional Oral History Office's interest in recording an oral history with artist Elmer Bischoff dates back to 1986. That was the year that a retrospective exhibition of Mr. Bischoff's work was traveling the United States. We collected critical reviews--several of those reviews are appended here--and made inquiries into funding. But then, as now, funding for interviews in the arts was very hard to come by, and Mr. Bischoff, vigorously pursuing his newest abstract work, was in good health.

Three years later, from December 14, 1989 to February 4, 1990, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted a major historical exhibition, Bay Area Figurative Art, 1960-1965, that focused attention on the figurative group--Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, and David Park chief among them. Park and Diebenkorn had been the subjects of recent shows at Bay Area museums, and much had been written about them. However, although Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco had been showing new Bischoff work in 1988 and 1989, and had exhibited Bischoff paintings from the figurative period in spring of that year, the "Elmer Bischoff, 1947-1985" retrospective had been the single presentation of at the whole of Bischoff's work.

It was suggested at that point, after the Bay Area Figurative show, that The Regional Oral History Office undertake a series of interviews with Elmer Bischoff. We were told that he was still active in his studio, and although his health was not good, his store of history of Bay Area painting was enormous, and his insights into his work were profound. He was a high priority candidate for an oral history. There were only two questions: Would he do it? and, Who would fund it?

Mr. Bischoff was invited on April 3, 1990 to be an interviewee. We wanted to know that he would accept before we put the whole project together. He did accept, and we received a small grant from the University of California's College of Letters and Science to begin interviewing. Regrettably, other funding never materialized, although considerable effort was expended to identify funding sources. The much-postponed project came down to three hours of conversation that took place in Elmer Bischoff's studio on Shattuck Avenue in downtown Berkeley in November and December, 1990.



Mr. Bischoff was receiving therapy for cancer throughout the period of the interviews, but despite the resulting weakness, he was very much engaged in the dialogue. And happily, before we began to tape, another major source of recorded dialogue with Elmer Bischoff came to light. In my research prior to recording I saw references to an interview conducted in 1976 for the Archives of American Art by Paul Karlstrom. Mr. Karlstrom's interview covered Elmer Bischoff's early years, and San Francisco Art Institute and Bay Area figurative painting history. With the agreement of the Archives of American, Smithsonian Institution, a copy of the 1976 interview is included with the oral history transcript.

Elmer Bischoff died on March 6, 1991. In February and March the Breakfast Group, of which he speaks in the oral history interviews, was exhibiting jointly at the College of Holy Names in Oakland [Feb. 10-Mar. 21.] In preparing for that show, one of the members of the group, Guillermo Pullido, an artist and a video-documentarian, taped interviews with the artists involved. It is hoped that the video footage with Elmer Bischoff will be deposited in the Archives of American Art. An exhibition of Bischoff's black and white drawings from 1963 to 1974 titled "Elmer Bischoff: Drawings for a Dialogue," opened retrospectively at the Oakland Museum in April 1991.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. A list of interviews in the arts conducted by the Office is included with this volume. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of the director of The Bancroft Library.

Suzanne B. Riess, Senior Editor  
Regional Oral History Office

June 1, 1991  
Berkeley California





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## Interviews on Art and Sculpture in the San Francisco Bay Area

June 1987

The following interviews related to art and sculpture have been completed by the Regional Oral History Office, a division of The Bancroft Library. The office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to the development of California and the West. Transcripts of the interviews, typed, indexed, and bound, may be ordered at cost for deposit in research libraries.

Angelo, Valenti (1897-1982) Artist  
Art and Books: A Glorious Variety, 1980. 157p., \$38

Asawa, Ruth (b.1926) Sculptor  
Lanier, Albert (b.1927) Architect  
Art, Competence, and Citywide Cooperation for San Francisco, 1980. 220p., \$55

Cravath, Ruth (1902-1986) Sculptor  
Cravath, Dorothy Wagner Puccinelli (1901-1974)  
Two San Francisco Artists and Their Contemporaries, 1920-1975, 1977. 365p., \$55

Dean, Mallette (1907-1975) Artist, Fine Printer  
Artist and Printer, 1970. 105p., \$43

Haas, Elise Stern (b.1893) Art Patron, Civic Leader  
The Appreciation of Quality, 1979. 185p., \$55

Macky, Eric Spencer (1880-1958) Art School Founders  
Macky, Constance (1883-1961)  
Reminiscences, 1954. 121p., \$43

Martinez, Elsie Whitaker (1890-1958) Artist's Wife  
San Francisco Bay Area Writers and Artists, 1968. 268p., \$60

Morley, Grace L. McCann (1900-1985) Museum Director  
Art, Artists, Museums, and the San Francisco Museum of Art, 1960. 246p., \$56

Neuhaus, Eugen (1879-1963) Art Professor  
Reminiscences: Bay Area Art and the University of California Art Department, 1961. 48p., \$36



## TWO CONVERSATIONS WITH ELMER BISCHOFF

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## TWO CONVERSATIONS WITH ELMER BISCHOFF

November 13, 1990<sup>1</sup>First Breakfast Group

Bischoff: I am probably not as exceptional as you're portraying me. I meet with--or I was when I was feeling a bit better, wasn't so plagued by this chemotherapy--Erle Loran, who is very articulate, and Sidney Gordin, who is very articulate, and a whole bunch of people who are, I think, head and shoulders [laughing] above me, so I don't take it too seriously when people say, "Oh, you're so articulate."

Riess: An example of inarticulate artist is Richard Diebenkorn in that New Yorker profile [September 7, 1987].

Bischoff: He had difficulty. He used to be much worse. He's much, much improved. He used to "Uh-uh-uh-uh" [grunts]. I mean, just be in pain and agony, and make you, the listener, very uncomfortable, seeking the right words. He had the idea but the words wouldn't come, the words weren't there. What has caused the improvement I don't know, but his speech is more fluent, not as jerky and interrupted, with long pauses and grunts and groans and all that.

Riess: Words are forgiving. But if you believed there was "just the right word," then would you believe about painting that there was just the right gesture, or brush stroke?

Bischoff: I don't think they're particularly connected.

Riess: Okay.

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<sup>1</sup>The interviewer met with Elmer Bischoff for an hour and a half at his studio, 2571 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley.



You said you meet with Sidney Gordin and Erle Loran. Is that the Breakfast Group?

Bischoff: Yes, that's what it is.

Riess: And it still exists?

Bischoff: Yes.

Riess: How often do you meet?

Bischoff: Well, there's one group that's very small--there are about five people in it--made up of Erle and Sidney and myself, when I show up, and Jerry Carlin. I don't know if you've heard of Jerry Carlin.

Riess: I've met him, yes.

Bischoff: Very nice guy. And Philip Morsberger.

Riess: I don't know that name.

Bischoff: I don't remember all the background of this, but he went over to Oxford, England, and became the chairman of the Ruskin School of Art at Oxford. He spent, I think, around three years, or quite some time.

Riess: But he started out in the Bay Area?

Bischoff: Oh, he started out back East. No, not the Bay Area. He started out in the East. He's taught and been visiting instructor at a great number of places, and this job at the Ruskin School was one of these temporary things. I don't think it was ever designed to be a long-range job. And then he came here. He was invited here as a chairman of the art department, because there'd been a lot of chaos, a lot of interpersonal friction.

So he became chairman, and then all of a sudden this friend of his [Neil] Hoffman, who is at [president of] CCAC [California College of Arts & Crafts], Philip had known him in the East and they had been buddies to a degree, and he invited Philip to come and join the faculty there. Well, for Philip this was more time for painting, and that's what he really wanted, because he was pretty much getting into the cubbyhole of being an administrator and not a painter, not an artist. He didn't want that. So that's where he is now. Well, he's in the Breakfast Club.



Berkeley Art Department: Mid-Sixties

Riess: That's interesting. The chairmanship of the art department at Berkeley doesn't just rotate?

Bischoff: It's supposed to, but there are factions that arose, and I'm not clear how these happened. Personalities, I think. I think it was just personalities bringing the kind of difficulties, interpersonal difficulties, with them. There are these factions, and if you voted for this person, then that faction would scream and break it up, and then if you voted for that person, this faction would scream and break it up. It was terrible. So they had to bring in an outsider. They hadn't done that for a long time. A total outsider.

Riess: The factions are not between history of art and practice?

Bischoff: No, they're not. The practice people don't see the history of art people very much. There was a kind of an antagonism there between those who wanted the art history faculty to be like the Eastern colleges where it's completely separate--I guess there are colleges out here that have it that way, I'm not sure--and those that wanted to have somebody--. Dick [Darrell A.] Amyx, for example, who was in the art history department, was there for years, wanted so much to bring them together, to have socializing and teas and all sorts of--and certainly be in the same building, and then have it under one administration.

Riess: How about Herschel Chipp? What was his stance on that?

Bischoff: I don't know. I never found out. I never questioned him about that. I don't know how he felt about that. Amyx thought of it more for the historians; it would improve their outlook on art and so forth to have the artists there in close proximity. But it didn't turn out that way. You never see art historians, with the exception of Peter Selz and Herschel Chipp, at openings.

And I don't think they have much regard for their various periods. [laughing] If you're a Greek art professor, ancient Greece, or maybe early Greece--they've got it divided up so much--you would have nothing to do with a medieval or Renaissance art historian, I should think. You don't talk to one another. Enemies, in a way.

Riess: It probably becomes an issue when they're trying to decide what are the required classes for the major.

Bischoff: Yes, I guess that would be one point where they would have lots





of debates and different opinions about things.

Riess: But this business has washed over you? You have kind of an amused attitude about it?

Bischoff: Well, yes. It happens in all departments. There's antagonisms and there's jealousies and there's some cutthroat stuff in every department.

Riess: When you came to teach, did you have administrative responsibilities?

Bischoff: I did early on. This was '64, when all hell was breaking loose on the campus and I was assistant chairman or vice-chairman or something like that under Amyx. And then Amyx suddenly went on leave briefly and Herschel Chipp took over for a bit. But this was when they were just doing the naughtiest things possible, and causing great anguish and torment. Aggravation, I think, is the word.

Riess: Did you work on this issue of making education relevant? That was supposed to be what the departments were trying to do.

Bischoff: The students themselves did that. You didn't have to. The students themselves would go out and work in poster crews. There'd be mass hiring. [laughs] Maybe it was all volunteer, it wasn't hired. But they would make posters for the protests on campus, and they wouldn't be in class. Those that wanted to really paint were in class. Some of the people who made posters came back saying it was the greatest time of their life; they felt really important and they were doing great things in art and all that.

Riess: How did you feel about that?

Bischoff: I was not in tune with it at all. I was in tune with the students coming and working in the classroom. They didn't come in and try to break up the classes. That would have been one step further. They didn't come in and try to disrupt things and prevent those who wanted to paint from painting. They didn't do that.

#### "Second" Breakfast Group

Riess: It sounds like one of the things this Breakfast Group, given the constitution of it, must talk about, or could very easily talk



about it, is teaching. What does the Breakfast Group talk about?

Bischoff: They talk about politics and they talk about art. And sometimes somebody brings pictures to show and tell. The pictures are something they think is marvelous and something they think is terrible, should be stopped. [laughter] Should call on Jesse Helms and have him stop it!

Riess: Do you actually get more conservative? As you look back over this group, do you think it has become more conservative?

Bischoff: In certain ways, and other ways, not. It's mixed. Politically, it's not conservative. It's not right-wing, it's not Republican, it's more inclined to be Democratic. There may be certain issues where there's a change, but in general you say this person has Democratic ideas, but if you talk about such-and-such you'll sound like a right-winger. [laughs] That kind of thing, you know.

Riess: Do you ever go as a group to an art show?

Bischoff: No. Oh, no. We'd go and look at a show and then come back and talk about it with the group, maybe bring some reproductions or something like that. It's free; it's very open and free and it's not regimented at all.

Riess: Where do you meet?

Bischoff: The four- or five-member group meets up at Fat Albert's [Fat Apple's] way up on Colusa in El Cerrito, up in the hills, right near the cemetery. And the other one meets at Kam's, which is down on Center Street about midway on the south side of the street. It's a real--. It's a truck drivers' hangout. Police meet there; they have breakfast there.

Riess: The Fat Apple's group is the one with Jerry Carlin and Philip Morsberger?

Bischoff: Yes, and all of those people come also to the other one, Kam's.

Riess: What constitutes the other group?

Bischoff: Let's see, now, there's a whole bunch of people there. There's Terry St. John from the Oakland Museum. There's Bob Loberg and Peter Shoemaker. They both have exhibited. Loberg went to Cal and Peter Shoemaker went to the Art Institute. They're kind of up around my age, or five years or so younger. Then there's Erle and Sidney, and then there's Jerry--all the same group that



meet up at the northern Fat Apple's.

The reason the second group was started is because Erle, especially, felt that the first one was too unwieldy. There'd be too many conversations going on. It was split up into this person talking to that person, this person talking to that person, so he wanted to have it more of a group thing.

This reminded me of when I first started at Cal in '63. Erle was very adamant about my joining the Faculty Club and going over to the Men's Faculty Club on campus for lunch. There he would sort of hold sway in a loose kind of way, in a not too offensive kind of way. He was master of ceremonies. Then is when he could parade all these New York visitors, visiting faculty members, and be able to control the whole big table of art faculty members. He was particularly smitten with the Eastern artists, and he knew a number of them very closely. He would be constantly going back to New York, which he doesn't do any more.

Riess: What do you mean by "he held sway?"

Bischoff: Well, he wanted this to be a kind of educational lunch, so that the Eastern artists would be talking, but they'd be talking most of the time about who's going with whom, and who dumped whom, and all. [laughter] As well as the dealers. Earl had an absolutely insatiable appetite for gossip, New York art gossip, and these people were able to satisfy it.

There's so many things you could talk about. You could talk about all trivia, and you could talk about important stuff, but there's action and life in this guy joining that, and this gal joining that dealer, and so on and so on. As opposed to talking about your painting in your studio, which, you know, it's hard to talk about.

Riess: Shop talk is avoided?

Bischoff: It is, yes.

Riess: That's interesting, that Erle Loran was smitten with painters from the East Coast. Isn't geography always a big issue, East Coast versus West Coast, Northern California versus Southern California?

Bischoff: Well, New York was the horse's mouth, of course, at that time, the time I'm speaking of, when I first joined. That started right after the war, and I think it was inspired by the immigration of lots of important artists to New York from



Germany.

Riess: What do you mean by the "horse's mouth?"

Bischoff: Well, New York was looked upon as the font of all good and proper and onward, forward-looking things in art. And De Kooning and [Jackson] Pollock and [Franz] Kline and Hans Hofmann.

Berkeley Art Department: Hofmann Syllabus and Faculty

Bischoff: Of course, a number of the instructors there, the old guard-- that doesn't include me--the people who were older than I am, and who were there when I was a student, studied with Hofmann. So he was a very important source as an educator and as an artist. Jackson Pollock not as an educator, because he didn't teach, and De Kooning likewise, and so on. But Hofmann was very important.

Riess: So the fact that Hofmann came to Berkeley gave Berkeley a validity that it hadn't had?

Bischoff: Oh, I think so. He came very early. He came in '32, I think, two years before I appeared as a student.

For a long time, the idea of having a syllabus for teaching beginning students to get them on the right Hofmannesque path was very strong, and that was something that came to be more and more fought against by incoming artists, new artists that were brought in to teach: "We don't want any syllabus. We want individual freedom to teach in our own way and to teach what we think is fundamental. We don't want to have a syllabus that tells us that this is fundamental; you must teach this." And finally it went, along with lots of other things.

Riess: In your interview with [Paul] Karlstrom you speak about "knowing the rules." I wish you'd talk about that. I really find it baffling to reconcile that with what you say when you discuss self-education and how students should be able to discover art for themselves.

Bischoff: Well, it's an attempt to sort of bring in an order, some kind of pattern, some kind of sequence in scheduling and so forth. To bring order into what otherwise is feared. I think it's kind of a misguided fear, that everything will degenerate into chaos and nobody will be able to talk to one another because they're





thinking in different terms and they're thinking about these principles and somebody else is thinking far from those principles, and all of that. I think that's what happened with the syllabus, the Hofmann syllabus, that just very strong individuals--.

You see, the difference really came from the war, and the kind of impact that this had on what was then the dominant thing after the war, the WPA. It really just knocked the spots out of it. So you could have people like Harold Rosenberg saying that the WPA set American art back: it was a great, misguided direction that the WPA went in. Well, of course, De Kooning and those people were saying, or had been saying, essentially the same thing, but not in print, in their own in art.

Riess: So the Hofmann syllabus came in when he came in, and that was in 1932?

Bischoff: It sort of filtered in gradually, and it was a result of his having been a teacher of a good many of the teachers at Cal.

Riess: Glenn Wessels, for instance.

Bischoff: Wessels, and Erle, and John Haley. And I can't remember what others.

Riess: Presumably they put together, for that period, the rules.

Bischoff: Yes.

Riess: And those rules held through the war period?

Bischoff: Yes, that's right. But during the war America didn't have anything to replace it. It wasn't until after the war then that all this stuff in New York started to burst out.

Riess: The thing that was happening here after the war was the G.I. bill and the teaching at the Art Institute. That was New York-influenced?

Bischoff: Oh, yes. The artists, oh yes. Very much.

Riess: Clyfford Still.

Bischoff: Well, it wasn't just Clyfford Still. It was a whole bunch. And the instructors, even when I started there at the Art Institute in '46, the instructors and the students, this New York influence was already there. You see, that's very early, that's smack after the war. The war ended in '45 and already this



stuff had started in.

Riess: Back to UC--I sent you a xerox of the art department faculty names from 1964-65, and it was close to what it looked like twenty years later, 1984-85.

Bischoff: Yes, that's true, the hours of teaching and all of that. Let's see, there were three-hour classes, and you'd have two classes a week. Each would meet three times, so that's eighteen hours.

Riess: But I was struck by the faculty by the consistency in the faculty.

Bischoff: You mean people staying on for years and years.

Riess: Right. For years and years and years.

Bischoff: Yes, that's true.

Riess: And yet the department has evolved? The teaching has evolved under these people?

Bischoff: It's undergone a good deal of change. You see, this business of bringing artists from New York was a big thing. It meant you were alive as a department, and you had this new thing to offer and all that. They started that early. Visiting artists. A big program of visiting artists, New Yorkers. Some of them stayed. Like Sidney Gordin came out to take one of these jobs, and he stayed on to teach. I think there were some others. There was a sculptor--I can't remember his name right now--that did likewise.

Riess: And Erle Loran was trying to integrate these people into the department quickly when he had you all eating together at the Faculty Club?

Bischoff: Yes, I would say that. Yes, he was very keen about things.

#### Earlier Years: Sharing Thoughts, Studio Critiques

Riess: Returning to the Breakfast Group, you said you would bring a small reproduction of something and talk about it. What's a recent piece that has sparked some interest?

Bischoff: I think it's been local. Some local artist. I can't remember exactly which one. It might have been Sylvia Lark, it might



have been Mary O'Neal, I don't know. And sometimes it would evolve into quite a discussion. Not necessarily of the piece, but something that the piece brings to mind, or some principle, or some attitudes and so forth. And then lots of times it would just be, "Yes, that's good," or "No," and it would die, it would just die right away. It would depend upon the mood and then who picked up some kind of an issue and started to promote it.

There can be a great deal of difference in the response. Some of the people at the group would like such-and-such, and others won't like such-and-such, and some heated discussion might arise out of something like that, where there's a division.

Riess: Have these groups been important in helping you figure out for yourself what it is you're doing on canvas?

Bischoff: No. No, not really. I'm too set in my ways, I guess. Early on, it seems like it's more natural to have buddies of a like mind come into your studio and discuss your work with you and that sort of thing. And that happened with me, especially with Diebenkorn and [David] Park. I think I spoke someplace about instituting these regular visits to one another's studios for critiques, which I never think of today. Now I don't do it, and I don't know of anybody that does it. I'm sure younger people do.

Riess: You did it because you weren't all that sure, is that?

Bischoff: It was a number of things. I think that's possibly true, what you're saying. We weren't all that confident about our own direction, our own ways. But also, it was to pick up ideas, to get ideas. It was like a second schooling. That's really what I think of it as being, that that was a second and more important schooling to me than Cal was, when I went there. And it was because of this kind of thing, where there were people that were of like minds and maybe different in nature but they were able to sort of agree on certain essential things, maybe just tacitly agree without it being spelled out or nailed down or written down in a syllabus or anything like that.

[Tape change]

Bischoff: The same thing at one time might have happened between [John C.] Haley and Loran [missing]--a real authority [who?] on Hofmann, knowing much more about Hofmann than he [who?] did. So there could have been this kind of very close exchange on a regular basis between those two. And I know when David Park went there to school, there were certain people that he really did connect



with. Margaret O'Hagan was one; he was especially fond of her, and he knew her before he started at Cal.

Riess: Is that Margaret Peterson?

Bischoff: Yes.

### The Problems in Art

Riess: When you say "getting ideas," what kind of ideas are you talking about? How to do something?

Bischoff: Oh, painterly ideas. Painterly ideas about space and about light and about movement, about the proportions of things, about all sorts of painterly concerns. Even rudimentary things like, "What paint are you using?" and if you've got a new paint, "How do you like it?" and maybe going out and buying some if it looked good. Ideas like that. Some simple, some complex.

Riess: Oh, well, that's good to know.

Bischoff: There was a lot of sharing, a great deal of sharing. There would have to be in a close situation like that, if it's going to sustain itself. There was much openness and sharing.

Riess: Now you're getting around to that other idea that I find so mystifying: the concerns in art, or the problems in a painting. These are problems that you set yourself, aren't they?

Bischoff: There are problems that arise in relation to one's own work that may be connected with what one--the intake. Having seen a Matisse show, having seen a Picasso show, having seen a--on and on and on, where, you see, you're constantly in touch with what these other people are doing, and there must be some degree of agreement if you're going to share these problems, talking about them, about these people, that these are giants, and they're important, and we can agree on that much, you know. You feel that they handle this in this way and handle that in that way and the space and the light and the color, and I don't know--all these things.

But then you run into a situation now where I don't think there's that much agreement, I really don't. I think that there's maybe a split much wider open so that there's more of a cerebral approach, which doesn't--. Maybe even the unity of a picture, which I've held sacred for years, that it comes across





as a very unified work, that's gone. You go into the galleries now and you see things which pride themselves on being totally un-unified.

Riess: So that you don't know where to begin to look?

Bischoff: No, it's very hard then for a person like myself to teach. It would take another person to deal with that, but it would be very hard for me to teach it.

Riess: But there is an "it?" It's like that's a stylistic "it" right now?

Bischoff: Yes, and I think it could be a basis for communication, verbal communication, and more of a closeness, more of a sharing between artists. I think it tends to divide. I think it tends --. Maybe that will pass when my generation passes. There will be more people that agree and see it.

And then there are suspicions that arise on that account. People will say, "Oh, that artist is trying to get rich quick," trying to make a quick success of doing that new thing, which is having everything dismembered and scattered, dis-unified. That's unfortunate, because that also is a barrier towards communication and getting together and sharing.

Riess: But that must be one of the easiest, cheapest shots at anyone.

Bischoff: Yes.

Riess: That they're just trying to get rich quick. I mean, were--

#### Dealers, The New, and Collectors

Bischoff: The new--. There's this book--. Who wrote it?

Riess: The Shock of the New? [Robert Hughes, 1980]

Bischoff: The Shock of the New. That's very, very important. In the marketplace, certainly, it's a very important thing. Amongst artists I know around here, I don't find much. Here and there maybe a case, but the magazines are loaded with "the shock of the new."

Then there are certain dealers who gain a reputation and make great sums of money on just that, the latest and newest. [laughs] And museums like the Whitney [Museum of American Art]



have been criticized for just putting on the latest and the newest from the dealers! They're right there near the dealers, and the dealers are sort of hand in glove with showing the newest and the latest.

Riess: The museums authenticate it in that way.

Bischoff: Yes. They support it.

Most of the artists don't pay attention to that--that's the art establishment I'm referring to, how they regard the art establishment, which includes the dealers and all the middlemen. When they speak of it, they speak of it very negatively, very critically.

Riess: The art establishment includes everyone but the artists. A tricky notion, isn't it?

Bischoff: It is very tricky. I remember talking to Clyfford Still at times, and it was always about dealers. He hated dealers and he would [laughs] put them down, put down all the middlemen, but he'd love to talk about that.

Riess: It's not very far, though, from hating dealers to hating collectors and hating people who like art.

Bischoff: Yes, that's true. Except Joan Brown had a solution to that. Get rid of all the dealers, and the collectors, and you work in collaboration with other people, maybe artisans. You work with the artisans, and you don't have anything to do with the dealers.

Riess: Was she alone in that?

Bischoff: I'd never heard it expressed quite as succinctly and with quite the force that Joan gave it. It was almost a religious conviction. It tied into her religion with the, who was it? Somebody Baba.

Riess: Meher Baba?

Bischoff: Yes, that's right.

Riess: And that's why she was in India?

Bischoff: Yes, but, of course, she's always been all over the world.

She was working on an ashram which was of that cult, headed by Baba. Somebody said to my wife--. I didn't go to the



ceremony [memorial services for Joan Brown] that they had in their studio in Hunter's Point, a great big factory kind of studio she had there, where somebody said to her [Adelie Bischoff] that the Baba himself would come while she [Joan Brown] was working on her sculpture and say, "Put this animal in here, put that animal in there," and so forth, which is a far cry from the Joan Brown I taught and I knew, who would not invite any interference like that, any other voice to come in and dictate, "Do this, do that." She was very opposed to that.

Riess: Did her thoughts on this have a big impact on the department?

Bischoff: No, I haven't seen it. In the classroom, where she's teaching drawing or painting or something like that, I don't know if she would air these ideas or just how she would if she did. I don't know. I haven't heard any student talk about her having brought this up in the class and made an issue.

Riess: Given all that ambivalence about dealers, what do you think of the people who buy your paintings?

Bischoff: Well, they're so varied, it's hard to know, you know. Even if you talk to them it's hard to know whether they really love the art or they bought it because they thought they might make a profit off it, which is very different. It's very hard to know.

My attitude is that once it gets out of the studio it's out of my control, and I can't spend my time bothering about it. If I get a dealer that I think is shoddy and crooked or something like that, then I figure that's going to be brought to my attention and I'll do something about it. But otherwise I can't--I don't want to spend my time that way.

Riess: Do you bring paintings that you're working on home and hang them and live with them and look at them?

Bischoff: No, because so many of them are so large, and my home doesn't have the wall space. We have lots of small paintings in the house hung up on the walls, but nothing the size of these? So, no, I don't do that.

Riess: When you have a retrospective it must be almost a startling regrouping.

Bischoff: Yes, they got things from people that I haven't seen for years and years, so it's kind of a treat to see these. Some of them hold up well and some don't hold up so well, so that it's fun to see that kind of thing, especially when they hold up.



Personalities Behind the Art

Riess: You talked about the accepted giants like Picasso and Matisse. Who are the giants within your lifetime?

Bischoff: I was very keen about [Mark] Rothko, I think more than Still, because Still was a different character. I don't feel the affinity, I don't feel as sympathetic and so forth towards Still as I do towards Rothko and his work. I was especially knocked out by his so-called mythological paintings, which came early, and they preceded the Rothko that we know. I saw a show way back, I guess it was just when I first started the Art Institute. [Douglas] MacAgy's wife [Germaine MacAgy] put on a show, a one-man show of Rothko. Gee, I thought it was just terrific, absolutely terrific.

You know, you can wonder why some works of art speak to certain people and not to others. For example, taking artists that were fairly close at one time--although I think that Still was impossible--Rothko and Still. And for some people, Still was it, and for other people Rothko was it. You know, and here were two equally intelligent, receptive, sensitive groups of people, and here there would be this thing, choosing, and you would feel then that there was a kind of underlying affinity there that's just not easy to verbalize, it's not easy to get to what causes that kind of thing. Like one guy falls in love with this gal, and then the guy can't see that: "Boy, what the hell do you see in her?" That sort of affinity.

Riess: You talked in some interview about a distinction between organic and architectural.

Bischoff: There could be that. That could be one basis. Or a more aggressive, more assertive, maybe even assaultive kind of art, might appeal to some people, and a gentler, more lyrical--I'm thinking of Rothko now--kind of thing might appeal to somebody else, you know. To think that Rothko was so keen about Milton Avery, you know. I just can't picture Clyfford Still--. Maybe he was, but it's hard to picture.

There were a lot of Rothko-ish paintings that I did in the early days at the Art Institute.

Riess: How early are you talking about, now?

Bischoff: When I first joined there, which was, as I say, in '46.





- Riess: It's hard to separate the personality of an artist from their painting, when there is so much publicity surrounding their lives. Like Jackson Pollock, for instance. Do you feel that you've been over-publicized, and over-interviewed because of the figurative show [Bay Area Figurative Art, 1950-1965]? People in search of "the man behind the painting?"
- Bischoff: Well, there's some of that, but I'm not too responsive to it, so I think that kills it. Kills a lot of it. There's some of that.
- Riess: Picasso seems like a completely known quantity as an artist.
- Bischoff: Don't you think that some people, whatever they might do, become a personality that is attractive? I think of, for example, people like Bob Dylan. Everybody wants to know about Bob Dylan. There are other singers that you don't hear that everybody wants to know about them. And this guy that did the Bonfire of the Vanities?
- Riess: Oh, yes. Yes, he gets tremendous press. Tom Wolfe.
- Bischoff: Tremendous press. He's a personality. And Tennessee Williams was a personality. So they get this. They've got to know more about this guy, how much does he drink, how many quarts of liquor did he drink? All this trivia, as you say, they invite it, and others don't invite it, and I think that I'm one that doesn't invite--I don't like that.
- Riess: But I'm wondering, choosing between Still and Rothko, and Picasso and Matisse, as you kind of pick your way back into history--
- Bischoff: That's another pair in which there's a choice. Some people think Picasso's greater and some people think Matisse is greater.
- Riess: All right. You don't find your choice influenced by the personality of the man?
- Bischoff: No. It's purely the art, and as I said, it has nothing--. It's very hard to describe why, because it's sort of, as I said, like falling in love with certain qualities in a person that other people don't see. They might see the reverse, you know, that kind of thing. And it's hard to then defend that. You can't defend it in court.
- Riess: That's true. I see that what I'm trying to do is hypothesize



something like that a kindly person could never paint a truly aggressive painting, or something like that, and that's silly.

Bischoff: Sometimes paintings are compensations for what one lacks [laughs] in real life. Aggressiveness or something like that.

But sometimes, yes, the artist and the art dovetail, or you feel they do, as much as you know about the artist, and you guess that they do. And sometimes it's very--you're amazed: "How could that person have painted that?"

Riess: In the Diebenkorn profile in The New Yorker they talk about moodiness. Are you moody?

Bischoff: No. I'm pretty even in that respect. And things in my personal life, and drastic things maybe like getting a divorce and so forth, haven't made much of a dent in my work.

Riess: That's interesting. One of the ways you can look at Picasso's life is through what was happening to his images of women in his paintings.

Bischoff: Well, that's pretty conspicuous in him with the representational work that he did, this sexual thing, and then the youth versus the old man. The old man being pretty unappealing, physically unappealing, and the gorgeous young thing--. [laughs] All that kind of stuff where you had this--. Which Matisse didn't do at all. There's nothing like that in Matisse. Confessional, and exposing all sorts of hangups or whatever.

#### Bischoff's Studio, and Leonard Bacon

Riess: Tell me what your studio life is like. You've got a huge stack of paintings here. You have one piece on the easel. It's an orderly studio, I think.

Bischoff: I don't think of it that way. I think of it as I've got to--. Every time anybody comes like yourself, I've got to clean up and straighten up things. I think of it as being on the edge of a mess.

Riess: You work on only one piece at a time.

Bischoff: Yes.

Riess: Where's the mess here? It looks neat to me.



Bischoff: I don't know. Now that you ask me. Papers piled on--. Like all of that stuff piled on here, all this stuff piled on here, and this stuff piled back here, and these piles that I have to fight because they can get out of hand and I've seen places where they take over.

Riess: Your studio is divided into two areas, a living area and a painting area.

Bischoff: It is. It is. Yes, it's manageable. It's very manageable. I keep it that way.

I remember seeing a photograph of Francis Bacon's studio. God, what a mess that was! It looked like some old geezer that the police in New York would dig out of a hovel. [laughter] It was just strewn with papers, and this stuff all over the floor. He was being interviewed by this guy [David] Sylvester and he started to talk about Velasquez.

"Oh, I've got a reproduction!" He gets down--this is Bacon--he gets down on his knees and he starts to look. Like in a W. C. Fields comedy, he starts looking for this repro, and there it is. It's stuck underneath, with paint on it and all, so he tries to wash it, washes it off. He shows it to Sylvester to illustrate that he had one.

Riess: Someone like that must have a very good feeling of bringing order out of chaos in making a painting.

Bischoff: Yes. And maybe that chaos is part of what feeds them as an artist, too, that kind of an environment. If they cleaned up--like Erle Loran's environment is always immaculate. Absolutely. Well, that was very much like his paintings. See, but you'd say, well, then this environment is like a De Kooning. Bacon's environment. If you saw a De Kooning in a studio like Bacon's. you'd find that very believable. But Bacon doesn't paint that way. Bacon's paintings are not as goopy and as full of trash, so to speak. They've become increasingly less given to having ragtag things. (This is Bacon.) They've become smoother.

Riess: They're very centered, too.

Bischoff: They're very centered, and I wish he would try to get back to some of that more sensual--. They're drier, they're not as sensual.

Riess: Would you think that he's probably a dealer-driver artist at this point?



Bischoff: Oh, I don't think so.

Riess: In the Bacon show in Los Angeles, everything was the same size.

Bischoff: Oh, yes. Everything had glass on it, too. I've heard complaints about that.

Riess: I felt very cut off from any notion of this being an artist who was working on a problem, as you talk about "the problems in art," or was growing, that he was just producing.

Bischoff: Well, his work has gotten--but not early on--his work has gotten that way. Like he's just producing these things. Maybe you're right; maybe he is dealer driven. I haven't ever thought of him that way, but it could be true. There are certain things that point to it.

And the covering with glass, I don't know. That's hard too. Because you think of his things as wanting to be very accessible and very immediate and very outspoken and very much there.

Riess: That's right. The visceral quality.

Bischoff: The visceral quality and the shock quality and the sensual quality. All these things very much there, present and active. And he's constantly talking about working on your nerves. It's not just an eye thing. What he's trying to say is something that hits you here when you look at these things. And his early things do that; they do hit you in the stomach. They're visceral. And these later ones are not. And covering them with glass and all, that seems to be cutting against it.

Riess: It's sort of like an X-rated movie in that way. It's only celluloid, you know, and yet it's still shocking.

Bischoff: You mean with the glass?

Riess: Yes.

Bischoff: I hadn't thought of that. I've never been to an X-rated movie.

Riess: I haven't either, but it's--

Bischoff: I can't picture the celluloid or what you mean.

Riess: Well, I mean that you're shocked by the ice pick going through the guy's neck, even though it's up there on the silver screen





and in a way it's a million miles away from you.

Bischoff: Yes, that's true. Maybe he's making a point of that.

Riess: There's something almost voyeuristic about looking through glass at this mess that he's showing you.

Bischoff: I was confused about him at first because I had just seen--this is way back when I'd just seen The Pope, or something like that, one of those big things [paintings]. And I thought, "Well, this is traditional left-wing, anti-Catholic, anti-billionaires, anti-Wall Street, anti--." [laughs] You know, you name it. And then the next thing I saw which shocked me was Van Gogh. And he's not knocking Van Gogh down, he loves Van Gogh. And then his friends, and then himself, and they're all couched in these same horrific, neurotic paintings.

[Tape Change]

#### Modern British Artists

Riess: Have you ever met Bacon?

Bischoff: No.

Riess: Do you have any interest in meeting "the man behind the painting," as it were?

Bischoff: No.

Riess: There wouldn't be a few really great questions that you would have for him?

Bischoff: No, I don't think so. I think he's all there in his art. All that I want to know. I don't want to know about the drinking escapades and the gambling and all of that sort of stuff. His wild life.

Curiously, there's a lot of that kind of thing. Not in Bacon, not that you'd say, "Well, you can see Bacon there," but in the new English artists, like in Bacon. I saw a bunch of them in Oxford not too many years ago. Un-English. If I saw those out of that context, out of seeing them in Oxford and knowing this was an English show of contemporary English artists, I would never think of them as English. I never would think that.



Riess: What are the un-English characteristics?

Bischoff: Well, some of the stuff a little earlier was American-influenced, influenced by [Robert] Motherwell or somebody like that. But this stuff I'm speaking of is not. It's kind of spooky. Some of it is very-- Well, say, take somebody like [Leon] Kossoff. Kossoff. I don't know if you know that name.

Riess: No, I don't.

Bischoff: It doesn't make you think of English art at all. It doesn't seem to refer to anybody. On the other hand, Lucien Freud does. I can go back and show you English art that is very, very close to Freud. I can't show you any English art that's close to Bacon. And then this other stuff, the later stuff that I mentioned, well, it may be closer to a kind of German angst kind of thing. It's dark, it's brooding.

Instead of a clarity of line, a domination of drawing, which is very typical--contours, it seemed to me, the emphasis on contours seemed to me to be very typical of English art--they try to break away from it if they can. Well, that's still with Bacon, and maybe you could say, well, there's the English.

But these other people are full of atmosphere. They don't have all these contours going. They're not colorists, exactly, except one or two that I can think of. And at the same time, they're not linear people. They're atmosphere people. I think some of them are at their best when they work in monochrome; instead of using all sorts of different colors, they have a kind of tonality, a yellowish or a grayish or a bluish or whatever tonality. So in that sense they're English, because I never think of the English as being particularly good at color, with a few exceptions, like Turner, maybe.

When you think of the French Impressionists, you know, you don't find anything like that in England. They don't have that sense of color, all these delicious nuances.

Riess: Now, that's interesting that you're looking for the unifying descriptors for English artists. Why should that be?

Bischoff: It's because you want it to be an experience, instead of something you "read," like looking from left to right. I think when the thing is broken up, you do see it. It induces you to see it in fragments. You look at this fragment and you look at that fragment. I've felt that the paintings that I grew up with--my folks had reproductions of like Maxfield Parrish and so



forth--I felt they were very ununified. They didn't provide an experience. They were something that you just sort of read, so to speak.

Riess: But I thought you were trying to read the exhibition as a unity.

Bischoff: Not necessarily. No, I was just saying--. Well, say, what do you experience when you look at the Night Watch? What do you experience when you look at some great Titian. and so forth. It is this unity. It's one vision, all-encompassing.

Riess: I thought you were trying to come to some conclusion about what modern British artists are trying to do as a group.

Bischoff: No, I was just sort of curious about them. I've spoken this way to many people as an aside, and they don't have any light to shed on this, and I don't have any light to shed on it. It was just some kind of wandering off of my mind into this realm which I thought was surprising.

I don't think I've seen any American show, you know, group show where I'd say, "This is not America. I don't connect this with anything in this country. It's unlike this country." Or with the French. But here it is with these, where there's a whole roomful of stuff that's just very unlike anything back in British history, or anything I can connect it with.

They have been plagued, though, I think; the British have been plagued. The French outdid them so badly, and then the Americans come along with their Jackson Pollocks and their Sam Francis and whoever, and they outdo them.

December 7, 1990<sup>2</sup>

#### Diversions: Chess and Music

Bischoff: [speaking of a chess opponent] He was a champion of some kind in the state. (I don't think it had anything to do with outside of the state.) After finishing a game with him, which I always lost at [laughs] every time we played, he proceeded to set up the board exactly at a certain point where he wanted to show me what mistake I had made.

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<sup>2</sup>Meeting took place at Bischoff studio.



I could never have done that. I didn't have that kind of recall. But it certainly showed me, demonstrated very vividly to me a certain kind of a skill, a certain kind of control, a certain kind of memory I guess you might say, because it certainly was partly visual memory that enabled him to do this. This was developed way beyond anything I could do. I was just sort of startled.

Riess: Was he also an artist?

Bischoff: No. He was a businessman of some kind. He sort of took it seriously and didn't take it seriously. It was one of those things which was I guess more of a hobby than anything else, had become that. I think it was a bit more than that at one time.

Riess: But chess could fill your mind completely once it became so much a part of you.

Bischoff: Oh, my, yes. It certainly would. It would take over. I don't have it to that extent; I'm not drawn to it. There are lots of things that I do that I don't think I really have very much talent in or I quickly exhaust or lose interest in. I do that from time to time. Painting is different, but I've done it with music, I've done it with learning to play instruments, I've done it with things like this chess.

This is just a partial kind of thing which has its clear limitations which I recognize. If I wanted to get beyond it, I'd have to put a lot of work in, and I don't think I'd even achieve it then. And it's not that way with painting, somehow or other. Painting keeps opening up, I'd guess I'd say. And then it seems to be encouraging rather than discouraging.

Riess: Do you think you picked up the other things at a point where painting was blocked, and that they were functional in that way?

Bischoff: No. Well, right now, because of my physical limitations I haven't been painting that much, so I think that that does, if that's what you mean, that does open a way into these other things that I get caught up with. It's almost as though I want to have something that not only occupies my time but stimulates me in some way or other, and chess does do that to an extent.

Riess: But it's not that it feeds back into the painting?

Bischoff: No. It's separate.

Riess: When you're painting, do you play music?





Bischoff: Sometimes. I have a big--well, it's not too big, but it's an assortment of tapes.

Riess: Do you get together with people to play anymore?

Bischoff: No. And I don't play jazz as much as I play classical music. I like Brahms very much, and I like Beethoven very much and I like Mozart and so on. Typical stuff, you know, that everybody likes, but this is what I listen to mostly. Not too much jazz.

Riess: Is this recent? Is the classical music associated more with the post-figurative art?

Bischoff: No. I've done this before that. This goes back before then.

Riess: So I can't just tie it all up quite so neatly.

Bischoff: But maybe a lot of people do this, have these fascinations they turn to. And I--the time before, when I started to get caught up with chess where you might find this chess game, as you did, on my table, would be when Fisher and Spassky played in Reykjavik, and I was very caught up then. I paid a lot of attention to what happened over there. Now I simply buy the New York Times because they have a fuller rundown on what has happened with this Kasparov-Karpov duel that's going on now. Now they're playing in Lyon in France, and they have I think seven games to go, but they're even, they're tied. It's very exciting.

Riess: It's not televised, is it?

Bischoff: Not that I know of. Somebody asked me that, and I haven't seen anything in the TV Guide. It probably would be on cable, and I hardly ever look on cable because we don't have cable, so I don't bother with it, I just read the paper.

Riess: These two famous duels--

Bischoff: And two utterly opposed personalities. They're just so unlike.

Riess: You know that from what is written about them, or from how they play?

Bischoff: Well, both. Kasparov is very, very aggressive, and he's very much of a promoter. He's very active in changing things, going outside of chess, and some people are saying, "Well, he's spending too much time away from chess [laughs] to win." He wants to be very friendly. He wants to promote chess in the



United States. He gets things going; he gets lots of things going. He's very active that way.

Karpov is very, very quiet and he likes the kind of a game where you subtly move and create positions and a whole bunch of these that gave you many, many opportunities, so when the other person makes a mistake, he zeroes in on it in a jiffy, and that's it. Whereas Kasparov is much more of an adventuresome player, more exciting, more unpredictable, really, and is much more concerned about attacking, attacking, attacking, attacking, not just this quiet "keep your place until you get your position and the other guy falters, and that makes it very exciting, makes it very dramatic.

Riess: Last time you talked about the Department of Art, and then you laughed merrily about the foibles and controversies, and the great succession of chairpersons.

Bischoff: Which I assume is true of almost every department.

Riess: Well, I was interested to look at past course catalogues, and I came across some things that happened at various dates while you were there, and I thought maybe if I mentioned them you could attach a little more flesh to them.

Bischoff: Well, yes, I'll try.

Riess: And you could tell me if any of this represented "isms" in art itself.

Bischoff: I think I said last time that what had happened earlier, the rallying point, the center which gave you a certain kind of power, a certain stature almost as though you'd been anointed, was having studied with Hofmann. Because just about all these faculty people that I knew when I was a student there were students of Hofmann. They were in, and if you hadn't studied with Hofmann, you were kind of out. That persisted for a very long time, and that was largely the doing of Erle Loran and John Haley.

Berkeley Art Department: Margaret Peterson

Riess: Considering the fact that the department roster changed so little in that time, that meant that there was a permanently in and permanently out group?



Bischoff: Yes, I think so.

Riess: Who was in, then? Let's by all means know who was "in." Erle Loran and Haley.

Bischoff: Erle Loran and Haley and Wessels. And then Margaret Peterson had also studied with Hofmann, so she was also anointed in a way, but then I think there was a personality conflict. She was difficult. She was a very difficult person, as much as she meant to me as a teacher.

Riess: I think you said somewhere that she was one of the people you could look back to who was totally wedded to her art.

Bischoff: That's the way I saw her, and that's the way a lot of students I think saw her. She was almost a cult figure in that sense of being totally given.

Riess: What was the difficult part of that?

Bischoff: It's just she had this kind of difficult personality. I remember one time my first wife and I invited Margaret, because she had an interest in jazz, to go to the Annie Street--.. What is it called? It was a group of people that were very popular at that time, and this was a New Orleans brand of jazz. Margaret and her husband we invited to go to this.

Well, we went. We got in the car and we picked them up and we went over to San Francisco. No sooner had we gotten into the place and gotten seated than they had a fight. I don't remember what it was. It was some nonsensical thing, but it made it just miserable for my wife and myself because we were sitting there in agony thinking they were going to kill one another. The result of it was that that was the end of the evening. They got a cab and they went off, and that was it, and we were left there.

Riess: That's very bizarre.

Bischoff: It was very bizarre, and it's a temperamental kind of a thing, I guess, on both parts, her husband and herself. What was behind it all, I don't know. That's of course the last time we'd ever do anything like that. She was difficult. She was flighty, and I guess I would say she was very egocentric too. A lot of artists are, but on top of that she had this flighty quality.

Riess: Do you think she had to struggle to keep her head above water in such an all-male department?



Bischoff: I wasn't conscious of that, but that could be. She seemed all-powerful in the classroom and I was not conscious that she had this battle, but it was going on. I found out later from what Erle said. For a period of time they wouldn't hire any more women. They thought that women would break up the whole department. [whistles, and laughs]

Riess: Maybe her temperament really did stand in the way. I mean, "if she was a woman, did they need more like that," kind of.

Bischoff: I think her temperament did. In many ways it puzzled me mightily, later, in looking back. And that, that I mentioned, that flightiness. She had a power to really dominate a class and put people sinking into the ground by just her stare. She really did. She had considerable power.

But then leaving the department, which I mentioned earlier, as a response to the faculty oath, and going up to the northwest of Canada with her husband, who was Canadian-- . Later on her art diminished. I told you all about that, I think.

Riess: I don't think you did. Not last time. [perhaps in Karlstrom interview]

Bischoff: I didn't? Well, her art diminished to the point where when I saw a show of hers after she'd been up there for a while, it was simply a mimicking of Kwakiutl and Klingit and all of these Northwest Indian tribes, which was, to me, a great disappointment. I felt it was a great comedown, and why did she do this, why did she give herself up in this fashion, why did she abandon her talents and her own voice?

Riess: What had been her voice when she was here?

Bischoff: It was Hofmannesque. If somebody said, "Who do you think this person studied with?" you probably would say that it's Hofmann. And sophisticated. It was up to date and so forth. But this was a kind of, you know [laughs], as though her parents had been Northwest Coast Indians, which they weren't. It was like a nostalgia trip; it had that kind of a flavor to it.

#### Berkeley Art Departmnet: The Hofmann Offspring

Riess: That's interesting. So those who studied with Hofmann were visibly his proteges for the rest of their lives?





Bischoff: I don't know if I'd necessarily say that you would always be able to detect a Hofmann student. Larry Rivers studied with Hofmann. Mercedes Manners studied with Hofmann. And loads and loads of people in the East. He had his school back there. These are pretty varied. He was a good teacher, I guess. He didn't have a stamped-out product.

Riess: Who does that leave behind, then? In 1961-62, there were [James] McCray, Felix Ruvulo--.

Bischoff: McCray I think studied with Hofmann. I'm not too sure about Ruvulo. He might have.

Riess: Karl Kasten.

Bischoff: Karl I think did. He came later. He was younger. He was my age. We were classmates.

There was Neuhaus, and there was Obata, and neither of those people--. That's when I was a student, earlier.

Riess: But they seem cut from an entirely different cloth, Neuhaus and Obata.

Bischoff: Yes. It's as though somebody with some kind of a force like, who might it have been? It could have been Erle Loran, but maybe [Worth] Ryder, would say, "Well, we should have a Japanese," and get caught up with this idea and be able to push this through, even though it was at variance with the going thing, as you point out.

He was worthless, I felt.

Riess: Who?

Bischoff: Obata.

Riess: You know, there's a tremendous Obata cult, though.

Bischoff: He was an artist that pleased tourists. He was made for tourists. He was made for Carmel and places like that. He was very trivial.

Riess: You could have found a more important Japanese artist.

Bischoff: Oh, I'm sure. Yes, I'm sure.

And then there was the German, Neuhaus, who painted--. Erle recently spoke about Neuhaus as doing some rather nice



still lifes. I never saw those. His things were technically very accomplished, but I think he was just about as slight an artist as Obata was.

Riess: You might have known him when you were an undergraduate.

Bischoff: I did. I didn't know him later.

Riess: All right. So there's that period and that initial schism, as it were. But then this time from the mid-sixties on when you were a full professor, I just wanted to ask about some of what seemed like highlights or momentous changes and decisions. In 1971, for instance, art practice was divided from art history. Did that represent a lot of heated department meetings?

Bischoff: I think on the art history part. I don't think that existed so much in the art department itself.

Riess: It hadn't been essential to your sense of self that you be included in the totality?

Bischoff: No. I guess the art history department was pretty unanimous, except for some individuals, that this be done.

Riess: And then the next year David Simpson was the chairman. I don't know whether he represents anything. In 1975, that was the first year that a portfolio was required for an art major.

Bischoff: Is that right? I didn't know that.

Riess: Two years later they decided to drop that requirement. I wondered if you could tell me what the problem was with that, with requiring it and why they decided to drop that requirement.

Bischoff: I think that there was some kind of a review--this is an ongoing kind of review--of things that were not really necessary, they didn't think were really necessary. I think that the dropping of the portfolio requirement was one of those things they felt was excessive.

Riess: It strikes me that it's closer to what a professional art school would require. This might be problematic, with the University of California's sense that it is not "training" people.

Bischoff: Well, that could be it. They would send in slides, and I think it was felt that the slides were sufficient to make a determination of the person's qualifications.



Berkeley Art Department: Changes in the 1970s

Riess: Also, year after year there was a new chairman, in the 1970s and early 1980s. Sidney Gordin was chairman. [Jerrold] Ballaine was the chairman. Brian Wall, Bob Hartman was the chairman. James F. Melchert was the chairman.

Bischoff: Yes, and some of these people liked the chairmanship. Karl Kasten, for example, wanted to be chairman lots of times, but he wasn't popular enough. The faculty didn't like him. He called too many meetings. He was too officious. Also, it seemed like what he wanted to do was to get out of the studio, and that is the worst thing you could want to do.

But, for instance, David Simpson, he is a very verbal kind. He can speak ad lib very efficiently and effectively. It makes sense that he would want the chairmanship. But he's not a bad guy at all. He's really good, and pretty well balanced. And he was drawn to it.

Other people don't want it at all. Felix Ruvulo never had the chairmanship. Because people--. Maybe by design, Felix Ruvulo held onto his Italian accent. [laughter] And then his wife Marty, I understand that she wrote all his speeches. Anything that he had to give a talk to the class en masse about, as opposed to one individual student at a time, she wrote out for him, and he read it. So naturally he'd be excused from the chairmanship. But it varies exceedingly.

Riess: In the seventies Erle Loran was still there, but he couldn't have continued to dominate the department, could he?

Bischoff: Well, no, it was not at all like it was when I was a student. It was much more varied and they would have these different isms that would come in, in fairly rapid succession, too, that would have to be dealt with.

Riess: When you were teaching, when you came in the sixties, you were a figurative painter. Did figurative painting become a dominant direction in the department?

Bischoff: No. There was always a part of the department which would follow the new, spray-painting, that kind of thing, or photo-realism and so forth. They would catch on. These were coming in very rapid succession, much more so than earlier. There was nothing like that at all before the war. This is all after the war that this happened. There would be some of the faculty that



would be carried over into these areas--to your surprise, they would be doing this--that had been appearing on the horizon. There was some of that, but I can't say that there was any--. It was too dispersed. It was too varied, I think. They'd had too many teachers that were doing different things to allow this [unclear] to actually take over.

Riess: So figurative painting didn't take over.

Bischoff: No, I can't say that it did. I was very conscious of that when I would go on visits, when I was a visiting artist, for a day or two or a week or whatever across the country, and I did many, many of those. I would be visiting departments then in the Middle West or wherever where this would be true, you see: Francis Bacon, everybody's doing Francis Bacon, students and teachers all doing Francis Bacon.

Riess: Do you think it's a strength at Berkeley that nothing ever took hold then, really, after Hofmann?

Bischoff: Yes, I think it was a very natural kind of thing. It was very much a part of the times, and it had its support, I think, from being seen as forward-looking, not backward-looking, not nostalgic and all that kind of thing.

#### Bischoff's Dissatisfaction with Figurative Painting

Riess: You've referred in other writings to this notion of a succession of new things. It's a hard notion for me, because--

Bischoff: Really? I thought life was filled with it. [laughter]

Riess: Life is filled with it, but the idea that an artist who's been working away in one medium or style suddenly comes face to face with spray painting and goes out and buys the equipment and starts spray painting--.

Bischoff: You feel it's kind of caving in?

Riess: Well, I guess it just depends on how fast this happens. When you were talking about Art Institute students such as Joan Brown, Manuel Neri, William Wiley as being "quick learners, quick on the uptake, able to absorb, to deal with a new thing practically overnight," I wanted to ask you about that? What is "a new thing?" "To deal with a new thing practically overnight."





Bischoff: It takes a certain makeup. I think that New York is probably filled with just this kind of makeup. Whatever comes on the scene, they can "deal with it."

Riess: But why should they "deal with it"? Presumably they've been writing beautiful prose, why should they suddenly become poets just because poetry's hot? That's what I don't understand.

Bischoff: There's so many reasons. Bad reasons and good reasons. It could be that they're very stimulated and very excited by the new thing and they may be a little bit tired of the old thing. This was true of me when I moved from representational to nonrepresentational art. It was purely a matter of this beckoning in a way that was irresistible. What I had been doing with the figure had caused problems to arise that I wasn't able to really cope with.

Riess: I wish you could talk more about that. What do you mean by "caused problems to arise?"

Bischoff: You're dealing with a particular image which maybe in the first instance, early on, when you undertake this, there's no problems. It's very, very go ahead, and it's exciting and it's new and it's something that is the promise of opening up into great, wondrous things and so forth, so there is that. After a period of time there might be such things as, for example, in the figurative painting I felt all along that there had been a conflict between the genre type of figurative painting and--

[Tape Change]

Riess: --as opposed to what?

Bischoff: Well, you're painting your wife sitting at a table reading, which is very far from Adam and Eve or the Virgin Mary or anything like that.

I then found myself pushing myself to become more, what should I say? I even changed, I found myself drawn to artists like Max Beckman, whose figures are very symbolic. They sort of stand for a range of things which are maybe mythological, and so forth and so on. And yet he's a very powerful painter and a very vigorous painter. He's not on a nostalgia trip or anything like that. I found myself drawn to that, and in doing--.

I was not able to do Max Beckman types of things. It was not in the cards for me. After trying with that and other



things, too, in the figurative work, I found that I had reached a kind of dead end, because where I wanted to go, I was not able to go.

Then I made the switch as a self-rescuing thing [laughs] to nonrepresentational work. I should say, though, that none of these things, it seems to me, are ever for anybody just one thing, like a rescuing thing. You are drawn to something else. It's like the breakup of a marriage. Usually it's accompanied by being drawn to somebody else as well as being fed up.

Riess: Right. Because nobody likes to go into a void.

Bischoff: That's right. That's right. Exactly.

Riess: Why are nostalgia, and you'd probably also say sentimentality, why are they such anathema?

Bischoff: Because they are associated from our childhood--. This may change in time with other generations, but they're associated in our childhood--I'm speaking of most all of the artists I know at Cal and so forth--with illustration. That's where they had their more pronounced role. And we were very conscious of that in doing the figurative stuff and moving from nonrepresentational to figurative and being accused of succumbing to a nostalgic view.

Even looking backwards, you can question that. Why was this nostalgia such a bad thing? Certainly nineteenth-century art has lots and lots and lots of it, and it was seen as fine art. I mean, lots of nostalgic things are perceived as fine art. Or the whole reverence for the Greco-Roman civilization. That's looking back, and that's taking a model from the distant past and holding them it as exemplary. Why isn't that criticized?

Well, it is now. It wasn't before, but now it's out, and there's this great pressure to have change, change, change, change rather rapidly compared to the nineteenth century.

Riess: Does this judgment about nostalgia come from the critics?

Bischoff: I don't know where it comes from, why the Victorian world is full of highly sentimental stuff. Why that? Or you could say, why, when I first to Cal, was it Giotto? We never heard of anybody much--well, I didn't hear much of Hans Hofmann, although he had been here a couple of years before I was. But I really didn't hear much of him. I heard most of Giotto, and that goes back to the what, 1200s or something like that.



Now, that's kind of taking a model from a distant past. It's leaping back over things. Well, you might see it has a parallel in English art with the pre-Raphaelites. They did that. They jumped back prior to Raphael and took that as a model.

Riess: It's interesting who's giving who permission to do these things.

Bischoff: Or how they take effect, how they glom onto persons or a group of people or so forth.

Riess: Can you remember the feeling and the attraction for the figurative when you first saw it?

Bischoff: I don't know if that came immediately. I think it was after dwelling with it a bit and seeing subsequent examples, at least for me, that that began to catch on and to have an effect. But at first I think it was just sort of a matter of, "This is so new and so startling, I don't know what to make of it. I like it, but I don't know what--." And so on and so forth, but then later on you become more convinced.

#### Talking about "Figure with Tree," 1972

Riess: In one of the catalogs--and there aren't enough of your most recent works in catalogs, sad to say, so I'm really hard put to point to examples, and I wish we had more things around here to look at--I saw a painting you did in 1972 that probably was one of your last figurative paintings. I've only seen it in black and white. It seems to be seascape, and there's a figure going forward and this hair is streaming behind. It seemed to be--

Bischoff: Is there a big tree?

Riess: I think there's a big tree. But it seemed like you were doing something transitional there.

Bischoff: Yes, you're quite right. [moves away from microphone to get a book, and returns] This is actually a documentation. These are slides that I had a gal come in and do, a Japanese gal. She's very good and very effective. [opening package] But these are two books of the same thing. This is just a cheaper covered copy of what happens here. So I'm not withholding anything. [laughter]



Riess: And in fact, we're looking at the expensive one.

Bischoff: Yes, this is the more expensive one.

Riess: I see there's a section on each page for notes. What kind of notes?

Bischoff: She's describing the condition of the painting and anything written on it.

Riess: This is a service for artists?

Bischoff: Yes. I got her name from a lawyer that I had gone to. He was conscious of her work, I don't know why. Here it is.

Riess: There it is, yes. ["Figure with Tree," 1972] I like it very much seeing it in color.

Bischoff: I still have that, actually. It's right here in that pile.

Riess: Oh, yes, and my memory of hair is wrong. But this is definitely it.

Bischoff: It's sort of an ocean. Titianesque. I was very much patterning these things around Titian. And ocean and land and then this trunk of the tree and the foliation and the clouds.

Riess: All full of elements you can name, and yet this was 1972 and it was very much towards the end of your interest in figurative, right?

Bischoff: Yes. That's right. I think it was the very last one I did. And I'd done a few others like that where they were not nearly as successful. But that's not your wife having a cup of coffee at the table. That's some almost apparition-like figure striding along.

Riess: What's unsatisfactory about the direction you're going in this? What's dead-end about that for you?

Bischoff: I think, answering your question, from the experience that I had at that time with my own work, is that everything is wrong. Everything is wrong in the sense that everything stays at a kind of arrested stage. It needs to transform itself, as I was mentioning with Beckman. You look at the early Beckmans, and you would say that about them, I think. They were much too literal and they're much too attached to the life--plants and things like that. Well this, I think, is the same way. This is too literal, it's not transformed into urgent symbols of any





kind, configurations.

Riess: That's interesting. Urgent symbols.

Bischoff: There's a tremendous force of that kind of thing, you see, with David Park and Dick and myself. Everything had much more of an urgency than you would ever find expressed in--what's the name of the East Coast representational painter? Not Philip Guston, but he was sort of associated, it was kind of the same time. And he wrote art criticism, I think, for newspapers.

Riess: I don't know.

Bischoff: Gee, I don't know if I have anything on him in here. Well, his work is bland. It's very quiet, it's very calm and it was very much praised in the East; he was highly respected, but totally bland. Everything I've seen of his is kind of washed-out colors.

Well, that's just the opposite. It didn't show any urgency at all. It showed a kind of a lassitude, to me.

Riess: That feels like a lassitude? [looking at reproduction of painting]

Bischoff: No, it still retained a kind of a force in the application of paints in these kinds of technical details and so forth of the paint. But it was the total imagery that I thought was [failing?], and I didn't like what was happening.

Riess: What are your feelings now when you look at it?

Bischoff: It still is very much as when I painted it. There are things I like, but they are details. I like this. I love the way I painted these things, some of the configurations. But in total I think this [looking at areas of painting] becomes very literal. More so than that. That is maybe more like Albert Pinkham Ryder. I think that's where I got that idea. Whereas this is Titian. I think it's a very good job. [laughs]

Riess: But on the other hand, if you look at your painting and say, "Well, now, that's one-third Ryder and two-thirds Titian," as you have just done, in a way, isn't that the kiss of death?

Bischoff: I don't know if it is necessarily. It would have to have something else to pull it off. It doesn't have anything else to pull that off. So that's why I look at it in a kind of a piecemeal fashion: I like this part and I like that part. Because it just doesn't have some kind of a vision, a unifying



vision, to bring this thing into a state that's more irresistible, that doesn't fall apart, that can't be divided up.

Riess: If you get way away from it, which I am, pretty far away from it, is it satisfactory as a composition?

Bischoff: Better. Yes, it's better.

Riess: You said to Paul Karlstrom I think, unless I'm misquoting you, that you could work on some of your abstract pieces and you could not determine until a ways along which end was up.

Bischoff: That's true.

Riess: With this painting there's definitely no question.

Bischoff: Well, no, but in the earlier stages I could have been turning it upside down over here and so forth. Which would require much more changing here than it would in a nonrepresentational work.

In many nonrepresentational things, when I finish them I have a time deciding which side is going to be up. Lots of times not, but then there are some times, yes, when I have this problem. This never happens here.

#### Pitfalls in Painting: Facility. Fragmentation

Riess: It sounds like there are not a lot of rules for painting when you say that to me, and yet--

Bischoff: There are not.

Riess: --there are not. But a lot of things you say make it sound like there are a lot of rules.

Bischoff: Maybe I've invented them.

Riess: What are the rules? You use words like "censoring." How might you think of censoring as a process when you paint? What kinds of things might you censor?

Bischoff: I think things that don't enhance, don't assist the visual intensity, visual unity, the visual expression. I think those things you're constantly on the watch for, and they crop up from God knows where frequently enough to kind of break up things or to carry you off the track, to be a sidetracking influence.



Riess: A felicitous combination of colors, perhaps?

Bischoff: Yes, and then you picture people that would have a talent, more of a ready talent, the kind of talent that gets you A's right from grammar school on in art, are very seducible by things that show great facility but have no meaning at all. Now, that's the thing that one has to guard against. Even a person of more modest talent than I am, you have to guard against that, because these things become very seductive. And your parents reward you with kisses and hugs. [laughs]

Riess: It's a facility, but it's not authentic? Hard to resist, though.

Bischoff: It is hard. I was thinking, though, of the kinds of difficulties of being a commercial artist where you're told what to do. You're given an assignment and somebody's over you and can cancel what you do out because they don't approve of it and so forth, so that the self-expression is out the window, and the individual working at one's own pace is out the window. All these severe limitations that you put up with. In that case I suppose it's for the money. Maybe in that case it's also talent.

I was talking to a person who had been a commercial artist, and they said, "Oh, there are big names. You don't know of them; you never heard of them, but the Japanese guy that does the Ford cars or something like that, he's so--. Everybody's copying him." And this is a world within a world. It's a world you don't even come into contact with.

You start thinking of all the different motivations and all the different feelings that arise or are involved in that sort of situation. Some of it parallels fine arts, but a lot of it doesn't parallel fine arts. One big difference is that when you look at a good piece of commercial art, you're really looking at a thing, a known thing in the painting. You're not looking at the whole shebang. By and large you're looking at the Ford car or the model or whatever, you're not experiencing a totality which grips you and probably remains. You're experiencing the enhancement of a fragment, which is a very different kind of thing, because in real life we get enough fragments thrown at us. [laughs] We're bereft of any all-encompassing ideas.

Riess: You have to sort of grab at the fragment, actually, if you can get a little pleasure out of the fragment.

Bischoff: I suppose. But that's even entering fine arts. There are art movements which emphasize the decomposition of the composition.



Riess: I can imagine being in downtown Berkeley at Center and Shattuck, which is one of the most distressed areas of Berkeley, and finding a beautiful leaf on the sidewalk, and focusing on it, and leaving out the rest, and or least trying to.

Bischoff: Oh, sure. I think that that happens. I think that happens especially with photography. You see that kind of focusing on a fragment.

Riess: [tape interruption]

### Explaining Art

Riess: When you came to Berkeley to teach in 1963 was it kind of a coup, that they got you at that time? Did you come with an enhanced reputation, so that you could get what you wanted?

Bischoff: I think from my role at the San Francisco Art Institute, because I had administrative work there as chairman of the art department, I think that helped. And I think that I did have a bit of a reputation, so I don't think they had to fight over getting me there. I came under Jim McCray's chairmanship. I was fond of McCray. Maybe that had an influence. I respected him and felt that there was more of an authenticity.

Riess: What kind of painting did he do?

Bischoff: He was influenced by Mondrian. He did a Mondrianesque type of painting, which was quite marked; I mean, you would detect it. Anybody would detect from a distance that it was a person influenced by Mondrian. But it was very sensitive.

I remember being over at the Art Institute--this was very early, I think just after I had joined--and Jim McCray was there as a guest for some reason or other. Maybe it was for reviewing work, because we met in this room and we were looking at a lot of students' paintings, and it could have been that he and I, or maybe Jim particularly, was brought in to assist in the selection of possible applicants for the graduate program, or something like that.

He was very enthusiastic and spoke very favorably, very convincingly, about a certain painting that we were looking at, and I couldn't make it out. I just didn't-- I said, "What's this guy doing?" It was foreign to me. And Jim McCray, coming





from Cal, I thought would be saying only things that I would understand because I'd been at Cal and had had him as a teacher.

But that wasn't true, and this made a great impression on me, that here he was able to enter what I saw as a totally foreign and not too inviting world. And later on I was falling for the same kind of thing, I was going for that, I was supporting the same kind of thing, because I was surrounded by it, I was living with it and got in touch with it.

Riess: So that's an important thing, familiarity.

Bischoff: Oh, I think so. I think that, yes.

Riess: You just learn to like it, like dissonant music.

Bischoff: You have to go to many exhibits to understand these things, that's true.

Riess: Does it help very much to have someone--Jim McCray in this case--actually explain why they like it? Does it have to have words attached to it?

Bischoff: No, I don't think you can. I think that what you say in liking a piece of art could be an interference as much as a help. I don't think so.

Riess: Why might that be, that what you say might be an interference ultimately?

Bischoff: Well, because you may be bringing things to it which alter it in the person who's listening to you, in their ears might alter it in a way which makes it lesser. It's as though they have to discover it themselves. When Jim McCray said this, I was left in the dark.

Riess: It's a little like that phenomenon of going to a gallery and finding red spots under certain paintings, so that you know--

Bischoff: That they have been sold.

Riess: --that somebody has made some absolutely committed judgment about. So then, "This is good," you say.

Bischoff: I don't think that, because I think that there are so many tastes. They might see something in there they like; it's not necessarily a good painting, but they are attracted to it. It makes a connection, maybe in a kind of oblique sort of way, in a way they would never be able to talk about or describe or



explain. And I just accept that.

Like when I go to a museum I expect to see all sorts of things. Things I like, things I can't stand. Why would they have them in there? Well, who knows? Some big collector put pressure on them and said they would give the museum [a big wallet?]. [laughter] Or it was simply to be up to date, which is a very different kind of thing. So it would have nothing to do necessarily with the aesthetic merits; it would only have to do with the current scene.

Riess: True enough, and the gallery owner could apply red spots randomly!

Bischoff: That's right. You see, you can't really foretell what there is.

[Tape Change]

#### University Art Museum

Riess: Did the University give you a studio space? Is that something that you got as a professor?

Bischoff: You have a studio office, offices which are designed as studios, with a high ceiling and the windows at a slant on this high ceiling. It goes up and slants over to face the north--that's the best light. You don't get direct sunlight coming in. So that's what everybody got. Sometimes I think when it was crowded they shared the space with somebody else. But I never used my studio space for painting. I had this room, this studio, before I began at Cal.

Riess: Is there anything in the way of an expectation of a relationship to the University Art Museum or to being able to exhibit or anything in that way at the University?

Bischoff: No, there was nothing that I recall that was of any formal nature in the connection between the art museum and the art faculty.

Riess: Was Peter Selz head of the art museum when you were teaching?

Bischoff: Yes, he was the first head of it. He was more interested, I think, in making a big-time, big-name museum and collecting, getting things in there in the exhibits. He had a very vigorous exhibit program going on. I don't think that he paid much



attention to the artist.

In speaking to Jacquelynn Baas [director of the University Art Museum], she spoke more of the art history and getting together with Burt [Burton] Benedict, who is now head of the anthropology [Lowie Museum of Anthropology] museum. I tease her. I said, "You're going to build a big bridge that goes from one side of the street to the other." She talked that way; she wanted very much to have a very close relationship with him. She didn't talk that way about the students.

What the museum has done--I don't know exactly, I can't remember exactly when this started--was to, by arrangement with the students, I believe it's with the students, have these shows of the graduate work. That goes on yearly.

Riess: Was there any effort on the part of the art department to get Peter Selz to look in his own back yard?

Bischoff: What do you mean, look in his own back yard?

Riess: Instead of setting his sights on exhibition material elsewhere, to exhibit more of the Berkeley artists.

Bischoff: I'm sure there was. It was always going on. I don't know of any specific instances of it.

Riess: It wasn't a concern of yours.

Bischoff: It wasn't a concern of mine, no.

Riess: Very soon after you came [1966-1967] you were given one of the Institute for Creative Arts years. It was sort of a sabbatical for an artist.

Bischoff: You're speaking of the sum of money that was allotted as a research grant kind of thing?

Riess: Yes.

Bischoff: Yes. That was nice. [laughs]

Riess: That, I think, was started in the sixties because artists never got that kind of sabbatical bonus.

Bischoff: The scientists did, but not the artists.

Riess: Yes. When you were on that did you have to have a program that you were working on?



Bischoff: Well, yes, but then you'd simply say, "I'm going to paint twelve paintings during the year," sabbatical year or academic year, I mean, and that would be sufficient. They'd be such and such a size, maybe you could add that. You wouldn't have to describe what they were.

Riess: And there's no peer or committee review?

Bischoff: Not really, no. I'm sure somehow there is. If it turns out that you haven't done anything through the year they would pick up on that. That is, they have a safety net so that they would see that this is happening, and they would then reduce whatever you had been given.

Berkeley Art Department: Students and Teaching, Colleagues, Visitors

Riess: Earlier you were saying that when you came in was a time when so many things were happening, like photo-realism and spray-painting and so on. Neither photo-realism nor spray-painting apparently attracted you. How come?

Bischoff: I didn't like the looks of the photo-realism.

The photo-realists that I had in class as students, they would bring in a photo and set it up alongside the painting, and they would start on the painting from the left and they would end at the right. They'd be at the end of the course when they get over to the right side. So you never could tell them anything, and there was never any exchange. I saw photo-realism--maybe I was corrupted and biased by this experience that I just described, but I saw it as being an escape from painting.

Riess: In a class that you were teaching they would be doing this?

Bischoff: Yes. At one time there would be one or two, not too many, in the class doing this.

Riess: I rather thought that in a painting class you had a lot more direction over the assignment.

Bischoff: No, this was upper-division, and the students were allowed then to pick their own subjects and to pick their own style and all that. Or to work in acrylics. They could even maybe work on





paper if the instructor would allow it. In the upper-division painting classes.

Riess: Well, what do they get out of you, then, under the circumstances?

Bischoff: Oh, this is only two people. This is a peculiarity. No, the rest of them would be right there tugging at my sleeve most of the time.

Riess: How do you teach? What is your approach?

Bischoff: I try to get connected with the individual and what their interests are and so forth. If they're working in a way which in time makes me feel they're barking up the wrong tree for themselves, then I tell them that. And then there are others. Usually in a class of thirty students, there will be five maybe really especially endowed hot-shot students. And they would, by their own presence in the room and by their own example, they would be influencing and helping.

Riess: Helping?

Bischoff: Helping teach.

Riess: By example.

Bischoff: Right. And I would encourage that. I would try to make a special point of adopting various means of encouraging this. Spending more time in talking about their work would be one thing, and there would be other means of "enhancing the status." [laughs]

Riess: And partly because you've gotten so much out of your relationship with your peers, you were trying to--

Bischoff: I expect so. I expect so.

Riess: --teach them a kind of generosity of spirit as a painter.

Bischoff: Well, yes, in a way. But at the same time one of my faults, which was pointed out in student evaluations at the end of the semester--a number of times it's pointed out that I tend to neglect the students if they're not so talented. Which I did.

I get very bored with having the same problem over and over again, and offering solutions or recommendations that weren't listened to. I couldn't find myself repeating the same stuff, which I felt was essential for getting out of a hole or getting



out of a problem or developing and so forth. I couldn't do it. Other people can.

Or another way of doing it is teaching more with a class en masse, bringing in lots of outside material, filling the walls each day with a new set of stimuli and so forth so that you become more the boss of the whole bunch and they then become more assimilated. It's easier if they become more focused on a certain problem so that you see then variations on this problem. This is more of a lower-division way of approaching things.

In the freshman year you're usually obliged to bring in a lot of external stimuli. "This is what I want you to do," and "This is the exercise we have today, and there are examples on the wall of how this has been dealt with by other artists," and so forth. That is the freshman level. But I don't know if that's so true today. It could be that that's loosened up. I've been out of it now for five years.

Riess: Do you miss it?

Bischoff: No.

Riess: Did it feed you in a good way when you were doing it?

Bischoff: Oh, yes. Well, I've taught so much. I've taught all my life, and the number of teaching jobs I've had which I haven't liked have been very few. And I must say, they have been at a lower academic level than the Art Institute or Cal, so that that makes a big difference.

Riess: Is CCAC a lower academic level?

Bischoff: I'm not too sure what CCAC is. I've never really been there, except for two brief courses I took before going up to my first teaching job at Sacramento. Remember that? Did I tell you about that?

Riess: No, you told Paul Karlstrom.

Bischoff: Yes. Well, I took a couple of classes just before starting in the fall, in the areas I was going to teach in! [laughter] I had no experience at all with the wheel, in clay, and I had no experience with working in silver, silverwork, the blowtorch and all that stuff. So I had to take these classes.

Riess: You also taught art history briefly?

Bischoff: I taught art history up in Marysville when I was up there. And



God, it takes so much time. It's not like teaching an art class. You don't have homework in an art class. But these papers! I had them write papers, and I had to read all that stuff. I had to prepare the slides that I was going to show the next day, prepare my lecture. I was up half the night! I really was. But I enjoyed it. I learned a lot. I learned a tremendous amount.

Riess: Because you had to describe the things that you had just been able to respond to before?

Bischoff: Yes, that's right, and then you had to be boning up on history that you had kind of a distant grasp on. And I turned it largely into a history class too, instead of just an art history class, curiously.

Riess: That's a great bonus for art history students.

Another sort of question. What kind of people do you find yourself most drawn to, and enjoy spending time around. Would they be called "creative people" category? Poets, musicians?

Bischoff: Oh, definitely. I have that bias. Of course, some of the creative people, it's like anything else, you know, you say, "Gee, I have a friend that's crazy about jazz. I want you to meet him because you're crazy about jazz." And they turn out to fight. [laughter] It's not the same jazz, it's not the same thing. So that happens, of course, in art too. It depends upon the individual and their personality and their makeup and all that.

I was for a while meeting with a group--. I was invited by an art faculty colleague to join a group called the Arts Club, which meets on campus. It's all Berkeley campus people, faculty members, and each member comes in and makes a little presentation of their area of interest each evening, and meets once a week. Well, I found so much of this so boring; I thought I'd be stimulated by it and excited by it, but I found so much of it so boring that I couldn't go to any of them anymore. I stopped going.

Riess: They were people who were presumably very engaged by the arts.

Bischoff: Not necessarily. It was all disciplines. It didn't turn out to be an arts group. There was this core of art faculty members, and one of them is the one that invited me to join this. There were some art historians, of course, but then there were all sorts of scientists and people--English literature people, I don't know. On and on and on. It was almost as varied as the



campus in its representation. That part was nice, I think. But there was a--I don't know how to put it, there was kind of a--.

I remember hearing Herschel Chipp, the art historian, talking about "Guernica." That was marvelous. He was such a different cut from the others. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but it was just that he seemed as though he wanted to tell you about something. And the others sort of wanted to hear themselves. And I think that's what made them boring.

Riess: That sounds very academic.

Bischoff: Yes, it is. I guess if you're behind a lectern all the time, it's hard to resist. But to illustrate, if you hear a person that throws in a French phrase here and there, you had better walk the other way. [laughter] It's that kind of self-promotion or self-flaunting.

I think I told you earlier about how Erle Loran had us all gather at the Mens Faculty Club to meet the visitors from New York, visiting faculty.

Riess: Yes. And how did the department decide on a visiting professor? Was that something that was done on a committee that you were present at?

Bischoff: Yes, names would be proposed, and then usually Erle would go back to New York. That's how he got this kind of fascination, this connection.

Riess: But Erle wasn't always the chairman.

Bischoff: No, but he was always the one that would go out, to go back to New York. Sometimes it would be a matter of inviting somebody directly, and sometimes it would be a matter of inviting them as visitors on a temporary basis and then falling in love with what they were doing and then asking them to stay on, a number of them.

Riess: Is this the way photo-realism arrived at Berkeley? Is that the way spray-painting arrived, with a single individual who was doing it?

Bischoff: Usually. I remember, Jerry Ballaine was the one that was very keen about spray-painting at the time [1968-1969], and he was the one that was instrumental in getting them to put in all of the mechanical stuff for a room for spray-painting. And it's interesting that it wouldn't take more than one person--and sometimes, like with Jerry Ballaine, a fairly minor voice--to





get something like that across.

Riess: Many of those people stayed, too. I mean, it's not that the department made mistakes and people were let go, ever! On the contrary!

Bischoff: No, the San Francisco Art Institute was much more wild in that respect. The diversity of the faculty was something that took a real master to manage, and [Douglas] MacAgy was that kind of a person. He could really hold this three-ring circus together, and it was a huge job. Of course, these personalities were much more egocentric, I think, than generally speaking at Cal.

Riess: But when Cal added people, they stayed. They came right up through the ranks. It's not like a lot of departments where you have visitors at the instructor level and they disappear. I mean, Joan Brown, Brian Wall, Sylvia Lark.

Bischoff: That's right. Boyd Allen, Bob Hartman.

Riess: Mary O'Neal, Christopher Brown. I mean, these people stay, and they become chairmen.

Bischoff: Yes, that's true. That's very true.

Riess: Okay, so much for creative people.<sup>3</sup>

Transcriber: Elizabeth Kim  
Final Typist: Suzanne Riess

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<sup>3</sup>The interviews were expected to continue, but Elmer Bischoff's illness made it necessary for him to cancel meetings. He died on March 2, 1991.







Elmer Bischoff  
INTERVIEW WITH ELMER NELSON BISCHOFF

Interviews Conducted by  
Paul J. Karlstrom  
in 1977

For information on reproducing portions of this interview, please contact:

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INTERVIEW WITH ELMER NELSON BISCHOFF  
LOCATION: Subject's studio, Berkeley, CA  
DATE: 10 and 24 August, and 1 September 1977  
INTERVIEWER: Paul J. Karlstrom

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TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ELMER NELSON BISCHOFF  
LOCATION: SUBJECT'S STUDIO, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA  
DATE: AUGUST 10, 1977, AUGUST 24, 1977  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

PJK: PAUL J. KARLSTROM  
EB: ELMER BISCHOFF

PJK: I'll start off asking you questions about your past and about your background. You've been generally associated with the Bay Area Figurative group, not that that finally describes all of your work. But never the less, this is the case. And you're certainly associated with the Bay Area. You've lived here, I suppose, most of your life. You've taught at the various institutions around here, attended the institutions, and currently are teaching -- and have been for many years now at the University of California. You were born in Berkeley, I think, in 1916. What I would like to start with is to go back and kind of lay in your own family background, a little bit about your parents, what your circumstances were.

EB: Yes. Well, I have lived in Berkeley all my life except for a few years away here and there. My father was a builder and built many houses, small bungalows mostly and then stores on Shattuck Avenue and along College Avenue, in Berkeley. My mother was a housewife. Across the street for a good many years, until I guess 1937, lived a grandmother, my mother's mother, and two uncles who never married. And then in addition, I have an older brother, five years older, and a younger brother ten years younger than I am. So it was kind of an extended family, considering the fact that there were these other relatives right at hand and frequently in the house. My uncles frequently came over for dinner and were in the house. So was my grandmother.

PJK: Where was this house?

EB: This was on Russell Street, on the corner of Russel and Cherry which is just a block up from College Avenue. Then as I say, across the street was a grandmother and two uncles. And I mention them because they played a role in my early life. There was a wide-spread interest in music. My mother played the piano, and I think she studied piano some and had somewhat of an accomplished technique, and I think was looked upon by herself (laughs) and by my uncles as the real musician in the family, although she had a great fascination for "Music the Whole World Loves." Do you remember it came out in the green cover with maybe a number of volumes? But I remember this thick volume, "Music the Whole World Loves," and there you found the very light and frothy piano pieces of no consequence.



PJK: And those were the ones that she would...

EB: Yes. And then now and then a Chopin piece. I remember she played "The Minute Waltz." Very nice. So she was looked upon by my family, I would say, by the whole family (when I was young I joined in on this) as being the real musician in the family. Then one of the uncles played the banjo; another uncle played the ukulele; both with talent. I remember them as being not at all fumbling about it, but being rather adept at their instruments. Then my older brother played the piano, and still plays to this day, he's still alive.

PJK: Are all your siblings still alive? There were three of you?

EB: Yes. My younger brother is living back East and my older brother is still alive. Lives in the same house, as a matter of fact. The house that we moved to when I was three years old, on the corner of Cherry and Russell.

PJK: So there was obviously an interest in music in your family.

EB: That was very strong. And there was a lot of music housed at the house. Every time we had a visitor, there would be some musical performance as part of the evening. My mother, my brothers, my uncles or maybe a combination of them. There was a short period where my father attempted to pick up the saxophone but he was conspicuously devoid of (laughs) any talent whatsoever. He was challenged by these because my mother and my uncles fancied themselves as being authorities.

PJK: And he didn't measure up.

EB: He sounded like a fish peddler.

PJK: You play the clarinet, is that right?

EB: No. First of all, I played the violin and took lessons. It was the only instrument I took serious lessons on. This was way back in grammar school, through junior high school. I gave the violin up when I was in high school.

PJK: Why?

EB: Didn't practice any more, didn't take any more lessons. But played in the orchestra. I was Concertmaster. Think of that. Junior high school, this is Willard Junior High School in Berkeley. And played solo at the graduation. And played the piano, but I never took lessons. Played the piano by ear. And then later on-- now this is much later, this is after the war, 1945 or '46, I forget what year it was--I took up the trumpet. And taught myself the trumpet. I think I sounded that way, too. (Laughs)



PJK: Okay, this is what I was thinking of because you, I believe, used to play those famous sessions with David Park and who else would join in with you?

EB: Well, there's a fellow named Charlie Clark -- David Park and Charlie Clark was a clarinetist. He was a student there at the time. We were the kind of mainstays. And then we had various trombonists, various drummers. That would usually be it, a trombone and piano and drums and clarinet and trumpet.

PJK: We'll get into that interesting period a little later on, but I think it's interesting that you first off, in connection with your early years, mention this family interest in music. That suggests to me that it really meant something to you.

EB: The strongest in me. Yes, it did.

PJK: Was there any interest in visual arts that you remember? Taken to a museum on occasion?

EB: No, nothing of that kind. On the walls, there were a few reproductions -- this is in my home -- of a nice little Parrish, that kind of thing. Both uncles had some talent in cartooning. The one that played the ukulele, he could have been a professional cartoonist, I think. He had a good imagination. The first things that I did were really under his influence, the very first art that I ever did as a grammar school kid was cartooning. And it was variations, really, under his spell.

PJK: This wasn't really in school, this was recreation?

EB: That's right. Oh, sure. As I would practice the violin and maybe horse around on the piano, I would do some cartooning just as a light diversion. But that was all, in terms of stimulation of visual arts. The music was much more present.

PJK: So there wasn't really anything then, in your early childhood, your family background, that would steer you towards a career as a painter?

EB: No, there's certainly nothing from my father, my mother. My older brother, that's all music with him. He's very, very keen about the piano, very keen about jazz. As I said, the only thing was these two uncles, and one in particular, who did cartooning. And they were not professional -- had no intention of ever becoming such. For them, it was just a matter of playing around.

PJK: I suppose the question that's now begging to be asked is, "When did you decide, or what made you decide to study painting?" Did you study it as part of a course in grade school, high school?





EB: No, it was in college that I became gradually more and more serious about art. I took art courses in high school but didn't do especially well in them and didn't get especially involved in it. I do recall, going back to junior high, there was one particular student named Phil Joy who was the star of the class. If you wanted any art work done, you called on Phil Joy, outstanding. And in high school, there were others, too, that were stars. I was never in that category, and my interest wasn't even that great. It wasn't until college that I started to....

PJK: What do you remember from, let's say, junior high or high school days? How would you describe yourself as a student? Your interests? Were you involved in any clubs or special interest things?

EB: No, I was more general, not that focused, except for the music. Except for that. But otherwise, not that focused. I played in the playground and had the kind of involvements that most of the kids had playing marbles and collecting bottle tops, and that sort of thing. But not as much as a great many of them. A great many of them went in for that sort of thing. I was timid. I was much more inclined to stay off to one side and watch other people doing these things. So my involvement was much more moderate, you know.

PJK: Do you remember any special friendships? Were you maybe a loner, more oriented towards your own family?

EB: Friendships were very specialized. There was a fellow my age lived across the street, and went to grammar school and went to junior high. We were very close friends. There was another fellow that I picked up with in junior high, and the three of us became close friends. But in grammar school, it was pretty much this one school chum, neighborhood chum. And I would be rather lost if he were not at school, (laughs) if he were home sick.

PJK: Sounds to me like Elmer Bischoff had a very ordinary, normal childhood, indeed.

EB: I suppose, yeah. I suppose. I enjoyed grammar school, and I did fairly well as a student in grammar school. And in junior high, the story starts to change. And high school was very changed (laughs) to the point of being reversed. I have this awareness of my school life. And yet, in certain respects, my involvements were more intense in junior high -- not high school, but in junior high. We were becoming less timid, playing football -- there was no junior high team at that time but sandlot, Saturday morning football at the Blueberry Field, on campus. This was a regular thing. We had helmets and the whole business. I was quite proud of my performance in this respect. We were looked upon as being pretty hot stuff, you see.



PJK: Did you continue in high school in athletics?

EB: No, I didn't. No, no I didn't. The only school involvement was in college: this was wrestling as a freshman. I joined the team. I was a freshman. But it didn't last any longer than that. That's the only time I ever joined a school team.

PJK: That is a rough one to choose. I remember the couple times I tried wrestling, I just about choked. I can't imagine anything that involves more exertion, putting everything into a few --

EB: Stamina.

PJK: Well, let's see. There really isn't anything that comes immediately to your mind from your own background, childhood, early education, that somehow has a bearing on the course that your career was going to make.

EB: No, I can't say that there is. There's certainly the encouragement I received from my parents, great encouragement in the violin. As a matter of fact, I received encouragement in everything I did. I think I was a favored child in that respect, that there were supports and enthusiasm, sort of "Oh, that's great" type of thing. That doesn't happen to all kids. It's kind of nice.

PJK: Probably gave you a certain amount of confidence about what you were going to do, I would imagine.

EB: Well, yes, that's accurate in that respect.

PJK: Your father was in the construction business, is that right?

EB: He was not schooled, he taught himself what was necessary to become a builder. He went to night school; he taught himself plumbing; he taught himself electrical work; he taught himself these things and then he would draw up his own plans. He was his own architect. And then what he would do would be to go around and pick up ideas that struck his fancy, from other peoples' buildings and that's what a lot of architects, builders of homes do, this sort of thing. And then he'd make his own composite of these. He would take me -- and this was when I was in junior high -- around, and he would ask me to make drawings. I had this talent, so to speak, for details of wrought iron verandas, of a chimney, of the front porch here, you know, this sort of thing, or the details of the shapes of the windows or the place of the windows in the house. That kind of thing. And then I would draw these, make sketches of these as notes for him.

PJK: But it never occurred to you at that point this was a talent you might be able to use?



EB: No. In the same way he would ask me to do the lettering on his plans. He would have difficulty with the lettering so I'd do...this was a chore. It would be very much like asking me to cut the lawn. (Laughs)

PJK: Which I'm sure he did as well. Well, were your circumstances fairly comfortable?

EB: Yes.

PJK: Say middle class, upper middle class?

EB: Oh, yes, right. No, we never were pinched for money, that sort of thing.

PJK: It sounds like, building houses and stores and so forth, one would be in a fairly good position. What about when you grew up in the shadow of the University of California -- and I see you've remained in the shadow ever since -- did this affect your life? Berkeley's supposed to be a very intellectual community and so forth. I'm just curious to know if being so near the university community affected your experience of growing up in any way?

EB: Not consciously. I'm sure it must have without a doubt, but we did not attend lectures or musical performances, or anything of that kind on campus. My father, and my mother too, had it firmly in mind that my older brother and I would go to college, that was in the cards. Now, we could be from way out in the country some place and they might have had that in mind, so it didn't indicate necessarily an influence in the close proximity.

PJK: What would be interesting to know is their backgrounds in terms of education and also of nationality, where they came from.

EB: They were both born in San Francisco. He's from German stock, and she's from a combination of Swedish and Spanish. Her background's more colorful because her father was a great sea captain and he operated between San Francisco and the Orient for a good many years.

PJK: They were born in San Francisco, perhaps around '90?

EB: Yeah.

PJK: So you really are a native, you go way back.

EB: Yes, that's true.

PJK: I don't know how important it is, but certainly in that generation not too many did go off to college, and I guess it became natural that they wanted this for their own children.





EB: Oh, that was very common, that's true. It was not unusual. My mother went to, I think it was called, Teacher's Normal, teacher training school. I think this was beyond high school, a year or so beyond that she went there. But that's the closest that they...

PJK: So they moved from San Francisco. Did they start their marriage in San Francisco and then move to Berkeley to the house when you were three?

EB: I think so. Yeah, I think so. Well, no, my father, I remember now, met my mother when he was building a house in West Berkeley -- West Berkeley was quite different then than it is now. Then, I think she was living on this side of the Bay, so by that time they'd gravitated to the East Bay. So let's see, then I enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1934, which was exactly what my parents wanted me to do. I don't know if it was Berkeley they chose, but nevertheless.

PJK: You said your grades weren't that good?

EB: No, in high school they were terrible. Here again is where the kind of relative financial well-being of the family saved my neck, because I was pulled out -- I was going to Berkeley High and was flunking out of there, like I was getting "F's" and put into a private high school, Williams High School in Oakland, where the classes were very much smaller, where you got individual attention and so forth. And got good enough grades there to make it into Cal. Then in my first year at Cal, I was on probation, nearly flunked out there. Part of that was due to the fact that my father wanted me to get into architecture, so I took these architecture courses and got "F's" and "D's." But in addition to that, I did very poorly in science, and these were the first requirements. I got a "F," I think it was, or "D" in a paleontology course, had to take it over again, and got a "C" from an easier instructor. Thank God for those easier instructors. Everybody said, "Gee, take Hines. You're bound to get a "C" at least."

PJK: So when you enrolled at Cal, your father was sort of encouraging you in the direction of architecture, which isn't too surprising.

EB: That's right. The picture of the university, and again I think this is a very common attitude at that time, was that the son continues where the father left off. I would simply be continuing his life, but I would have the advantage of the college education. Otherwise, there'd be no difference, see? Did your father think that about you?

PJK: I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. I think he ultimately had to give up any fantasy like that. And I hope that he is just as happy. But at some point, you --





EB: He had great expectations, and that's kind of nice. It's burdensome, but it's nice.

PJK: But it became clear to you that architecture wasn't your forte?

EB: Oh, yes. I remember these assignments in the beginning architecture course where we'd have to do a plate on a very large sheet of paper, showing the door and column, for example, and the details of the capital and the fluting of the column, the base of the column, all that sort of thing, with the labeling off to one side. And this had to be neat. I would invariably get mine all smudged up. And there'd be any number of students in the class who had the most beautiful, immaculate, professional looking results. So just a general clue was in the sloppiness which was something that made it impossible for me to become an architect.

PJK: Of course, we don't want to say that carried over into your painting. (Laughs)

EB: Well, I don't know. I don't know. You see, the way I like to look back upon this is I rebelled against the kind of sterility -- I didn't see it as this at the time. I was envious of the powers that these other students had to keep it so much under control. And I rebelled against the sterility, unconsciously, and wanted to warm it up. I got it all smudged up.

PJK: Do you remember at what moment and why you then decided to -- I guess you majored in painting, right?

EB: No, this was gradual. This was rather gradual.

PJK: Can you describe the process?

EB: It was much too much a matter of just getting more and more into it as a gradual process. It would be easier for me to describe the process of my getting involved with the violin, because one day my mother brought home a tin violin from the five and ten cents store. Love was immediate, spectacular. And they claim -- I don't remember this -- but here I was in grammar school, couldn't have been more than six or seven years old, early grammar school, and they claim I made such beautiful music on this that in short order they ran out and brought me a hundred dollar one.

PJK: Replaced your tin violin. Did you love your hundred dollar one?

EB: I had them on their knees in two shakes. They had tears rolling down. So if you ask me how my involvement started in painting, it was not like that at all. It was not like they went out and bought me some tin brushes. No, it was a very, very gradual... And I had, in grammar school and



in high school, I had a very good teacher, a gal named Ballett, I forget the first name, with a reputation as a high school art teacher. She was a very good teacher, but I didn't especially catch fire, nothing great happened, nothing great ensued. It wasn't until this gradual thing at Cal as a freshman with all my feet over the architecture camp, then as a sophomore, coming into art and gradually getting interested, and as a junior more and more involved. My grades started to pick up after I got the breadth requirements out of the way in the lower division, then I could put more and more time in the art thing. Everything started to pick up. My whole academic career began to look rosy after the undergraduate period of real phenomenons.

PJK: But you did major in painting as an undergraduate, I gather --

EB: Yes.

PJK: -- with the idea of going onto graduate school.

EB: Well, that came later.

PJK: Was there any thing that stands out, say in terms of your undergraduate experience in connection with you --

EB: Yes. Certainly the teachers that I had in the art department, most especially Margaret O'Hagan -- Margaret Petersen was her maiden name. This was the first time I really experienced anything quite like this, this intenseness, this concern, inspiring -- terrifying, too. She was a real fire-eater. She had us terrified. But she was so completely dedicated. Now, I must say that this teacher in paleontology that I got this horrible grade from, he was that way, too. He absolutely loved paleontology, and this was a breadth course but he expected everybody to become life long paleontologists, or he treated us that way and he treated the subject that way. It's a great thing. It put tremendous pressure on; in the case of the science I couldn't meet that pressure. But in the case of the art, then it was a marvelous kind of thing to run across this zealot, this saint.

PJK: And Margaret Petersen was such a teacher?

EB: Absolutely, yes. There's nothing as important as art.

PJK: What was she like as a teacher? What was her approach?

EB: First of all, she dressed in a very unusual, very unique, very personal fashion. She loved to wear colors that were curious, like yellow and orange. She'd have a skirt that was striped yellow and orange, she'd have pink shoes on -- imagine yellow and orange and pink -- and maybe pale white stockings. Then she had these pale blue eyes, huge, round pupils that were watery blue, very pale. She had pale blond hair. Well, this is true. But then, here her



personality was enough to scare the daylights out of you. She'd come in and she would just stare, and the class would be absolutely silent except for the trembling. And if she didn't like something, she would say it in a way which was brutal, absolutely brutal. Some students would hate her because of this.

PJK: But you didn't? You were inspired, I gather.

EB: Well, I was altogether. Yeah, I was scared stiff of her, though, I was really scared stiff of her the whole time. And she was not really a person that you could warm up to. She was not a person you could get very close to.

PJK: What did she teach? Painting?

EB: She taught drawing and painting. And here was the very first time I had encountered Picasso. She was crazy about Picasso and here, as a beginning student, you were in front of a still life set up, you're working in charcoal and newsprint, and you had to do this in the manner of Picasso. Makes it sound kind of phony, doesn't it? (Laughs) You would cubize it. And you had very clear cut models, very clear cut notions about what the end result was to be. So when all of these things went up on the boards for a class critique, they very much looked alike, some a bit more adept than others. But in terms of the objective, you would say they're all cued in, all very identical.

PJK: Was this typical of the instruction at Cal in the '30's?

EB: I guess it's typical of all schools, yes it was.

PJK: Who else do you remember among your teachers?

EB: Erle Loran was influential and, again, an inspiring teacher; and Worth Ryder, especially in terms of art history. He was a good art historian. I think he was marvelous because of his intense enthusiasm, his enamorment of art, especially certain periods, the early Renaissance, he was a Giotto fiend. He was just absolutely in love with Giotto and the artists of that period which, as you know, some historians would even put Giotto as a Late Gothic as opposed to an Early Renaissance, and others would say Petrarch was the morning star of the Renaissance, Giotto was also a morning star in painting.

PJK: So this would have been your first contact with art history classes?

EB: Yes. Those art history classes were all taught by artists then.

PJK: There really wasn't an art history department then?

EB: No.





PJK: Of course, there weren't many in art history then.

EB: Even Eugen Neuhaus, who wrote a book on American art history, was a painter, and he exhibited. Not at any great length, but he did paint and he did exhibit.

PJK: What about Erle Loran? Of course, his Cézanne book came much later, but nonetheless, I would imagine that some of the interest that led him to go stay at Cézanne's house -- actually when was that? It seems to me that his initial visits may have been in the late '30's?

EB: I don't recall.

PJK: But anyway, I was just wondering if any of his early interest in Cézanne, first of all if it existed at that time, and then if it was transmitted to you and the other students?

EB: It was. His interest, his particular esthetic, his particular kind of involvement with the formal aspects of compositions, that did get across and did make its mark. The Margaret O'Hagan thing, that was a much more dynamic and, I would say, a much stronger influence on me than any other influence.

PJK: But why? Her enthusiasm? What specifically? Was there something in her own style?

EB: In her own work. Then I think the fact that she seemed, I mean in viewing this as a student you get an impression from a person, and this impression is terribly important. It needn't be accurate. The fact that it exists and the fact of its potency is the important thing. It's your own imagining, maybe. But at any rate, she, like other teachers, gave the impression that she ate and slept art. This was twenty-four hours a day, this was her life. And none of the other instructors gave this impression nearly as strongly as she did. This was something she got tremendously elated about, tremendously angry about, tremendously passionate about. None of the other instructors...it to this degree, not saying the other instructors didn't feel this, it's just that she was able to dramatize it -- she was a great dramatist. So, sure, Clyfford Still must have infected his students that way, that this man, he and art are just like that, they're glued together, they'll never come apart, he is art. And she was a person like maybe Hans Hofmann -- I never knew him, you see, but maybe he again had this kind of effect. Now, whether or not this is true really doesn't matter. All of these people that I mentioned -- you can probably think of a lot more names, you know -- have tremendous power to dramatize themselves, and they take themselves very dramatically. She did. So maybe I'm talking as much about the susceptibility of a college student in those days, I think college students are much more independent today, but I'm talking about a college student in those days. And we were all empty vessels to be filled.





PJK: Right. I was just going to point this out that then, certainly much more than now, a college student entering an art program in this area would have such exposure. The paintings, the original paintings, I would imagine -- sure, I suppose that one could go over to the deYoung or something like that, the Legion, too, was open by then, but you wouldn't see much contemporary art, and that's what you would be concerned with. You were an artist working, a student at that point, and becoming an artist. And I suppose your models then, more so here than in New York, perhaps, would have been the teachers.

EB: That's true, yeah. That's very true and what was given to you by your teachers, so your enthusiasm for, say Braque and Picasso, this was brought to the class by Margaret O'Hagan.

PJK: What did her work look like? Can you remember?

EB: Oh, yes. Well, there was some of the signs of the Picasso enthusiasm. Her work was figurative, it always dealt with subjects like Picasso, recognizable subject matter. Do you recall the big still lifes that he did in the twenties, that Picasso did in the twenties? The Lamb's Head and The Red Tablecloth and these? That Picasso she was very keen about, that phase of Picasso I would say had the strongest evidence of its presence in her work. Then she was crazy about the Russian icons. So there was this, except her color in the form was much more of the nature of Picasso and the size of her work and this sort of thing, the voice it had was much more like Picasso's voice. But there were some of the formal qualities of the Russian icons in her perspective, including the Table Top and the expanding of the table as it goes back into space. And this was Russian icon. She was keen about certain aspects of El Greco. This was less conspicuous in her work. She would show reproductions of El Greco and talk about El Greco, but the evidence of his work was less marked in her own paintings. And what else? I guess that's it. I think she participated in the general Giotto enthusiasm. Giotto was maybe the strongest influence, the most all-pervasive model at the university in the art department at the time I was there, and she participated in that.

PJK: Did your student work then look something like Margaret O'Hagan's?

EB: Sure. Sure. As much as I could get it to do so (laughs). Yeah, well Margaret O'Hagan and then certainly modified then by the other instructors.

PJK: What about John Haley? Did you take his classes?

EB: Yes, I did. And also Glenn Wessels's. And I would say that his influence on me was perhaps less than Loran's and definitely less than O'Hagan's. And the same would



be true of Wessels. I took classes from Eugen Neuhaus and Chiura Obata and so forth, but they would be more minor.

PJK: Well, you're a teacher -- in fact, you've taught for many years now. How would you rate or characterize the art department at the University of California in the thirties?

EB: I think it was good. I would have to say that largely, not in terms of the esthetic -- although if you're going to have very clear cut models which you're going to present to the students which were characteristic at those times, characteristic of all the art departments in all the universities, I would say as a general statement of those times, I don't think you could pick any better models than they picked. It was prejudiced in the sense that as you proceed into the Renaissance from Giotto, especially into the time of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, they saw everything as going drastically down hill. As a kind of repeat of the picture moving from Classical Greek to Hellenistic Greek, you see. And this would include such people as Titian, too, this marvelous Titian, he would also be a step down from this pinnacle. Now okay, that's the negative side. But the enthusiasms were very positive, and I think that what they cared about was worth caring about, their concerns and the esthetics and all that, were worth caring about. The fact that..., they were practicing artists, the fact that they brought a personal passion to a greater and lesser degree to their work and to their teaching, and certainly to the whole realm of art, I think that this was excellent. I'm not sure that you would get this at every art department. I think that Cal was especially good in that respect. You had a bunch of concerned people, really concerned people.

PJK: It seems to me from what you say then, the department would have been less interested in color than form; there's an interest in Giotto, Cézanne, and I gather the formal aspects. You just mentioned Titian as an example from a later period, but is this true? Was there an equal interest in color?

EB: I think I would say it is true that there was an equal interest in color on the part of O'Hagan -- I keep calling her by her married name, Petersen, Margaret Petersen. I'm trying to think. The idea of drawing preceeding color, the idea of drawing being foundation in that sense, the idea that you don't form things in color, you form things in line. Possibly, secondly you start thinking in terms of darks and lights. Thirdly you start thinking in terms of color. This kind of sequence. Now, the whole curriculum is this way. When you start, the very first courses are not color, they're black and white and mostly they're line. Later in that same course might be introduced to dark and light development. And then your second year you might work in color almost as a separate



concern. Then in your upper division you put these things together and start to make works of art. 'Well, I never encountered the reverse of that, I never encountered any interference, any challenging of that hierarchy, you might say, or the sequence which leads to the hierarchy, until I encountered Abstract Expressionism after the war at the California School of Fine Arts. I never knew anything. I never knew it could be approached any other way until I encountered Abstract Expressionism where you would start a canvas actually with areas of color.

PJK: I was just going to observe that I would expect, maybe from a very early date, perhaps when you were a student, you might have exhibited a decided interest in color.

EB: Well, yes, but with these restraints. I think that what you say is probably true, but then looking back on that situation, you would have to say that color is not as fundamental, is not the structural element that line is. You were asking me -- this is a reply to your question about did color take a back seat in the teaching at Cal. I would have to say yes.

PJK: What was the situation at what became the California School of Fine Arts across the Bay? Was it a very active art school at the time you were a student at Cal?

EB: It was active, yeah, because as you know it goes back to 1870 or something like that. But, I think the situation then was the reverse of what it was looked upon as being later on, where Cal was avant-garde and the California School of Fine Arts, as it was then called, was looked upon as very academic.

PJK: So it wouldn't have drawn students for graduate school --

EB: No.

PJK: If you'd decided you could have done better elsewhere, let's say in the Bay Area, you would have gone there?

EB: Did they have a graduate school at that time? No, I don't think so. No, I don't think it had any drawing power and, no, I think that actually the university art department was a much more vital place at that time.

PJK: You mentioned the fact that -- this of course was in the thirties, a period of social realism and the regional movement...

EB: WPA murals.

PJK: -- The WPA murals, certainly, and the public art projects beginning. What was the relationship of the university art department to these developments?





EB: It looked to other things of a purer nature. I think it felt that the social realist art was too anecdotal and was an adulterated art form, it didn't have the formal qualities, it didn't display sufficiently the formal qualities which were the enthusiasms of most of the faculty. Most of the faculty did concur, actually, in their esthetic. For those reasons, there was very little evidence of the influence of mural work in the work of the students at Cal. I remember a course I took, I guess I was a senior at this point, and I did a fresco in the basement, not very large, maybe six feet high and four feet wide, of the old Spreckle's Art Building at Cal. And the design I did for this was a la Michelangelo of my own choosing. I was not especially encouraged, as I pointed out earlier. And this was a scene of workers who had been beaten up by police. (Laughs)

PJK: My, God, how precious.

EB: And they were sort of helping one another, limping along helping one another.

PJK: This suggests that you had some decided liberal tendencies.

EB: Well, it does. You see, I was not especially politically conscious one way or the other. But here was a social realist scene that had somehow crept in and I don't know how.

PJK: How did you choose it?

EB: I don't remember how it came about. The best I can recall, it was basically an esthetic decision. I liked forms, I liked the way these figures would work, you see, it was sort of a sensuous composition because these figures were a little bit like Christ who'd just come off the Cross.

PJK: There's a political statement there, there's no question.

EB: Oh, yeah. Well, I picked obviously from some episode, I guess. I'd seen that idea. But the appearance of anything of that nature was not characteristic at all of what was coming out of the art department in those days. I don't think this was bad; I don't think the fact that the art department was holding the line pretty much against these contemporary things going on in the art world was necessarily bad. I say that because I very much approve of their basic enthusiasm.

PJK: What do you think they would have thought of, say, Thomas Hart Benton or someone like that?

EB: Not very highly.





PJK: Who were the heros of contemporary art at that time, partly for your department, but mainly for you and the other students? Were you familiar with other American artists or pretty well the Europeans?

EB: The Europeans. Number one was certainly Picasso. Matisse never had much of an influence at all on the art department at Cal. That's a very interesting thing. I don't know, I think it would be hard for me to say exactly why he would not. Maybe it's a thing about power.

PJK: Perhaps too decorative?

EB: Too unanalyzable. Too difficult to talk about in analytical terms possibly. The art department did have, as a general characteristic, that love of analysis.

PJK: And therefore an interest in cubism probably.

EB: Interest in cubism, right. And in formal terms, some artists are very much easier to talk about than other artists. Imagine trying to talk about Rembrandt in formal terms.

PJK: No, I don't think that'd be a productive way.

EB: Very, very difficult. There's nothing to really hold on to.

PJK: What about Americans? Were you aware, were the other students aware of any big names in American art? Was there any sense of an American art, a national art, other than maybe social art?

EB: None, other than social. These names didn't --

PJK: You wouldn't know about Dove, for instance --

EB: No.

PJK: -- or Marsden Hartley, Marin?

EB: No, pretty ignorant. Pretty ignorant of all the things that were going on. And anyway, I think we had the standard prejudices that's...all actually reflections of the European. It wasn't until later, you see, that you got American art that originated in America.

PJK: I suppose that's true as a matter of --

EB: Well, no, I think your question's a very good one. And here would be a very legitimate, marvelous enthusiasm for people like Hartley and Marin and on and on. But they didn't exist.

PJK: Not even aware of them, probably?



EB: No.

PJK: You obviously didn't have great opportunities to see great pictures. I mean, that's still a problem around here.

EB: That's true, yeah.

PJK: So I imagine that much of what you saw was in reproductions, magazines and so forth. On the other hand, there were certain events, special exhibitions that did come out here, and we'll talk about the Golden Gate International Exposition, for one, which certainly had an art pavilion. I gather you would have been a student at that time. We can't remember an exact year, I think it was '39, but anyway, you were certainly --

EB: -- finishing up.

PJK: What was your experience?

EB: Well, I remember the art pavilion as being a marvelous collection of things. One thing sticks in my mind especially is the Birth of Venus of Botticelli. I went back time and time again to see those things in the flesh after having seen them for such a long time in reproduction. It's always a thrill and a revelation.

PJK: That's what I was going to ask you. Were there any specific revelations or did it tend to confirm?

EB: It tended more to confirm, I think. I experienced more a kind of real alteration of judgement, real alteration of point of view. Later on when I went to Europe in the sixties, and spent a lot of time in the museums. There's where some artists fell drastically and some moved drastically in my estimation.

PJK: Since you brought the subject up, which ones? What would be an example of fallen idol, so to speak?

EB: I was disappointed with Velazquez and it's as though the reproductions make him look better. I was looking forward to seeing, for example, the painting Las Meninas, I was really keyed up about the prospect of seeing that. And when I actually came face to face with it, it was a let-down, it was not what I expected to see. It didn't have the resonance that I somehow had imagined it to have because of the reproduction. The Surrender of Breda, again I was looking forward to this with great anticipation. It didn't do what I had hoped it to do. On the other hand, some of the very last paintings that Frans Hals did, there's five or six old ladies, they're governesses, I believe, very austere painting and primarily you see their faces and their collars, their white collars and white cuffs and hands moving through this dark, huge space. Beautiful



painting. Of course, here you've got room after room after room in this museum in Haarlem, Frans Hals' paintings and you don't see that kind of thing at all. So I'm really talking about one or two.

PJK: Last time, Elmer, we got you through graduate school, which I think is a pretty clever feat to manage in just one day, just a few hours. And you graduated then, you got your M.A. in 1939, I think.

EB: Right.

PJK: So what I'd like to do, first of all, is complete the biographical outline. What did you do after graduate school?

EB: Well, the first thing was to get a job because I was already married. I married in my graduate year and there was a child on the way. So getting employment and being financially self-sufficient was important. I had a general teaching credential plus the M.A., so I was looking for any kind of a teaching job. It turned out that the only ones that were available at that point, or the ones that were available to me, were high school jobs. There was a job open up in Sacramento, and there was one open down in Brawley, which is down in the valley in California.

PJK: Down in the desert isn't it?

EB: In the desert. I think it's just above the border. So I went up to the Sacramento high school during the summer and visited with the teacher there who was leaving the job. His name was Carleton Ball, and he was a pretty well known ceramist. From there he went down to Mills College. I haven't heard about him for a long, long time, so I don't know what happened to him, but he was a real live-wire and had worked up a pretty good reputation for himself. He was a large, burly, bewhiskered person and he proceeded to tell me during my visit to look over the facilities and so forth and to be interviewed up there during the summer of '39. He proceeded to tell me how the courses that he taught were ceramics and jewelry in the shop row. Across the hall was the electrical shop, there was a machine shop, and auto shop and printing shop, I don't know, a whole raft of shops. And all the deadwood, all those who were impossible academically, all the football players, were shunted into these courses. Most of the time, he was beating up kids out in the hall. (Laughs) And he was physically equipped to do this. As a matter of fact, he proceeded to tell me how he worked his way through college boxing professionally in smokers and things like that. So, you can imagine how this left me shaking.



PJK: But you took the job anyway?

EB: Well, I had the summer ahead, and my schooling at Cal didn't prepare me for the specifics of teaching ceramics and jewelry. They didn't have any classes at Cal. I knew about painting and I knew a bit about a few other things, art history, but I didn't know the techniques involved. So I took three courses that summer in preparation for the job, a ceramics course and a jewelry course at Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and then I took a boxing course.

PJK: I don't believe that. You're making that up.

EB: No, that's true. That summer at Cal. And grew a mustache to look older. And then went up and started in on this job. The very first day, the very first morning of classes, some tough looking guys came to me early -- I was in the room before class started, maybe about fifteen minutes before the first class -- and announced to me that Faith Hatro [?] was headed this way. I remember that name. Faith Hatro, beautiful name. Headed this way. Like (laughs) a cowboy movie. Like Jack Palance was headed into town, watch out. So I didn't know what to make of this. They just announced it and disappeared.

PJK: Well, did he show up?

EB: Yes, yes (laughs). Before long there was this knock on the back door, the door that led out into the courtyard, a door that was not supposed to be used. You're supposed to come down the corridor inside the building, through the front door. So I thought, "I guess this is (Laughs through talking I could either open the door or else run out the front door down the corridor. So I decided to open the door and to do it with a great deal of fire and flare and authority. I threw open the door, and I hollered, "What the hell are you doing knocking on this door? You know it's not the door to come in." The guy...(Laughs) I did this so effectively that Faith, who's a tough looking little guy -- he was short, like a little dictator type (I understood later he's a boxer, too) and his companion, who was bigger, both made off. They backed off and they disappeared. Never saw Faith Hatro (laughs through talking). From then on, I fancied myself a master at bluffing. In the whole two years I was there it was endless bluffing, it really was.

PJK: And you were never called on?

EB: I was never called on it, fortunately. No. Always bluffing, always challenging, always threatening. The opposition was always doing that and I was bluffing my way out.

PJK: Seems to me, then, your years teaching high school in Sacramento were more memorable for that kind of thing than your evolution as an artist.





- EB: No, no it had nothing. You're very much, even at that time, now high school's infinitely worse, but you were very much the policeman. No, I never felt that I had any students there. There was one student, he wasn't in the class, but he brought his work to me periodically. He was always dressed in a shirt and tie and suit. Don Burelle was his name, and he later became the designer, and I'm not sure what kind of a position he evolved into, at the Nut Tree. He became their artist, the designer. But outside of that, there was no one that I ever heard of.
- PJK: But you did start your own family life in Sacramento, then?
- EB: Right.
- PJK: Well, while we're on the subject, what about your own family? How many children do you have, this type of thing.
- EB: Well, I had a son and a daughter born while in Sacramento. The son was the first one to arrive and then a daughter. Then after the war, two sons. Then my first wife and I separated, got a divorce. And I had another wife and another son, and we divorced, and I'm with the third wife now. We have an adopted son. That makes four, five, six counting the adopted son. One daughter.
- PJK: This is rather an elaborate family situation.
- EB: Yes, it is.
- PJK: But I imagine you're able to keep track of the offspring to a certain extent.
- EB: If I don't have too much to drink. (Laughs)
- PJK: Then let's see. You left Sacramento. Of course the war broke out.
- EB: Yes. I should mention, though, that there was some activity up there, centered around the WPA, and a financed community group. There was a commercial artist named Ben Aikan<sup>?</sup>, who worked for a department store up there, and he and I became very good friends. I think he was an influence on me, not in terms of art. I was still in the throes of Braque and Picasso kind of thing, and my work showed it. My work was a very obviously derived from Braque and Picasso. Ben was an influence, I think, in terms of political attitudes. He was liberal, much more liberal minded than I had grown up to be at that point. And he was an avid reader, and he put me on to various things to read and so forth. He was an influence, I think a very good influence, in that way. The other people up there that I had some contact with were not artists that I would have any long range regard for.



PJK: But there was something of a community, I guess, a small artist community. Would you describe it that way?

EB: Yes, it was. And then we had drawing groups. We drew from the model; there was a group of us that got together and did that.

PJK: Which is something you've really continued to do, I guess, off and on, right up to the present.

EB: Yes, I think you could say it's a fairly persisting activity except I'm not doing it at the present time. That's right. And then I worked, I would paint on Sundays. The teaching job was very exhausting emotionally, very exhausting. It took up the whole day Monday through Friday, so that I just had Saturdays and Sundays when I could get some painting done. But all together, I would say it was a very uninspiring and unencouraging climate. For any period of time, I just can't imagine an artist who's accomplishing anything, advancing his work, growing at all in an environment like that unless he's a Cézanne, an exceptional case.

PJK: Then you joined the Air Force, I believe.

EB: Yeah, I had an ROTC, reserve officers commission, second lieutenant in the reserves, from Cal. I came out of Cal well prepared for the general secretary and a commission in the reserves and for any eventuality. And I didn't want to be in the infantry. And I heard that they needed people at Mather Field in the air force --

PJK: Where's that?

EB: Right outside Sacramento. It was very easy to transfer from the infantry into the air force which was still at that time part of the U.S. Army.

PJK: Well, did they call you up? This was after Pearl Harbor.

EB: No, they didn't. It was a case of having to guess just about when your number's going to come up. They were calling up the reserves at that point, and you just sort of had to, without having any inside line, you just had to figure out, well, they're going to be calling me up pretty soon. And you wanted to jump the gun on it because if you waited, you might just get stuck in the infantry. So I went out to Mather Field, and sure enough, they needed people in all sorts of categories. And depending upon the time you showed up, you might get stuck in the signal corps, you might get stuck in the G2 or G3, it all really depended on what they needed at the moment. Very chaotic. It's amazing that anything was accomplished at all in such chaos.



PJK: How did you feel about the war? You said that you'd begun to pick up more liberal views, more political consciousness. I know a lot of those who might have called themselves pacifists before Pearl Harbor, when that came it really switched around, really felt that this changed things and that there was an imminent threat to this country, and it was a case where one welcomed the opportunity to serve one's country, push off the Germans and the Japanese. You joined up presumably because you knew your number was coming up. But beyond that, what was your attitude?

EB: Well, my attitude was just dawning at that time. I very much went along with whatever was existing. This is true of my art, too. I was not that independent, not that independent of other thoughts and conditions and so forth, so that my political attitude, even though as I say I found Ben Aikan a very interesting guy and his putting me on to readings of one kind or another that I was taking to...I can't say that I had any individual stand about the war. If we were going to fight a war, I accepted that without...I suppose it was a very good war to be in if you have to be in a war, because it seemed like, even more so than the First World War, this was more of a black and white issue. I think we still look upon the Axis Powers as representing a very, very bad thing, you know. And it's not changed. In the First World War, they started out by saying that the Kaiser ate babies. Well, it turned out that the Kaiser didn't really eat babies. But the Second World War was one of these unusual things, it was almost a throwback to some kind of a god awful primitive mentality on the one hand, you know.

PJK: Well, I think that's true that a lot of those in the '60s who opposed the Vietnam War probably would not have done so in the '40s.

EB: No, that's right. It'd be much better to be involved in the Second World War than the Korean War or the Vietnam War. So you could say that the Second World War was not particularly a war that invited reflection on the purposes and so forth. It was pretty obvious. My concern was sort of to get out of the infantry and in to the air force.

PJK: So you ended up in the Army Air Force and then actually found yourself in England for a period. How long was that for?

EB: Well, that was the whole war. Let's see, from '39 to '41, I was teaching then in high school. From '41 to the middle of '42, I was at Mather Field; it was a year and a half, roughly. Or a year. Then I was sent overseas to England and was just then settling in with the bombing units and the fighter units. This was very early in the game.



The RAF fields were being transferred over to the US forces. So I was there for the initial stages. England had already been through the Battle of Britain, so that was in the past. And they were just beginning to absorb all of these American units who were being sent over there. And I was stationed at High Wycombe for practically the whole period until towards the end of '45. It was three and a half years, summer of '42 to '45, no wait a minute, end of '45 it was. Yeah. And High Wycombe was 40, 50 miles up the Thames from London, so it was an ideal place to be based. Beautiful.

PJK: What was your duty? Did you fly at all? Did you see any action?

EB: No, I was in the intelligence section, I was concerned with training and aircraft identification, and I had to make periodic visits around to the bomber stations and assist them in the development of the aircraft identification programs.

PJK: Doesn't sound to me, then, as if that period really added much to your own interests as an artist.

EB: No.

PJK: Little opportunity, I suppose, to sketch or do landscapes.

EB: I did very little, very, very little. I did occasional sketching, but nothing on a regular basis. No kind of program.

PJK: Did you feel this as an interruption?

EB: Yes, I did. Oh, yeah.

PJK: Because obviously you were committed to a career by this time, one would suppose, as a painter; this was your proper calling, and that is not something that you can turn on and turn off, or you prefer not to. So that must have been somewhat difficult.

EB: Well, what happened was that I spent a tremendous amount of time, a lot of this feeling went into playing piano. They had pianos available in the officer's lounges and so forth, and I did spend some good deal of time doing that. This was a matter of working up all sorts of arrangements, popular tunes. Spent a lot of time working up these elaborate arrangements. All sorts of popular tunes.

PJK: Do you feel that during this time, there was anything that affected your own ideas about art or development as an artist? In other words, did you have the opportunity to see any art there? Of course I imagine most of the masterpieces had been moved into cold storage during the war. I don't know exactly when that happened.







EB: They were.

PJK: So going into London wasn't like going out to the national galleries?

EB: No, that's true.

PJK: So you really didn't have the opportunity, I suppose, to see European masterpieces.

EB: Not the availability.

PJK: And this was your first trip to Europe, I suppose?

EB: Yes.

PJK: So in terms of seeing great works of art, you drew a blank. So it had even less effect on your art interest then.

EB: No, there was certainly not directly, no connection. It was a matter of my art interest being in abeyance for that time a big stretch of time. I don't know, you think of artists that got into the service as artists; they were commissioned to do portraits of generals and colonels, or to do decorations in the USOs or do murals, some of that went on.

PJK: Or paint camouflage.

EB: Or paint camouflage or to paint, I think there was some art where they painted battle scenes. I know they did that in England. Did we do that? Did we have artists painting battle scenes?

PJK: Certainly there were artists covering the war. I believe so. I'm not absolutely sure of that.

EB: I'm not absolutely sure either. I've never seen any books.

PJK: At any rate, you had this experience in England and returned at the end of '45 to the Bay Area. You should tell me, but I gather shortly thereafter you started teaching at the California School of Fine Arts. Earlier you told me that you view your education as 50% at Cal and 50% at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. What do you mean by that?

EB: Well, it seems to me that there were a number of things that happened that come under the general heading of maturity, I guess. I feel the war had a very strong effect in that way. I went over there as an officer and quickly became aware of the fact that there're all sorts of people -- this is the first time, actually, this had dawned on me, had come to my awareness -- there are all sorts of people at various stations, various positions in the service who were very effective. This had nothing to



do with rank, and it didn't seem to have very much to do with education, it didn't have much to do with where they came from. It was a very wide open situation, as I said. It's not like moving into a settled condition. It was a situation in the summer of '42 where a great deal of improvisation was needed, and I was absolutely baffled by the chaos and the complexity in making the transfer in these stations of, let's say, the RAF into our hands and all of the kinds of new experiences, new conditions that had to be dealt with and where order had to be brought about in a jiffy, no time to be lost. I was absolutely amazed at the innate know-how that was displayed. This was very much of a democratizing experience like I've never encountered before. It just seemed like my whole life before was hedged around in ways where I'd never come into contact with it. It was as though we were going through life in a closed compartment, you see, and I only came into contact with my own kind and I didn't get to see what other people were like or how they would act in very varied situations. So I emerged, I came back from the war then, with a totally different outlook, much educated, I would say. Not educated in art but educated about myself and about ways of viewing human beings. This change, which I'm sure loads of people underwent, and it was to a great extent instrumental in bringing about the divorce from my first wife, the break.

PJK: Could you be more specific? What was the nature of this change?

EB: Well, it was a little bit like the change that took place when I say that 50% of my education in art occurred at the California School of Fine Arts. It was a little bit like that change of a complete alteration in self-expectation because of an alteration in expectations from other people. I don't know how else to put it.

PJK: How did you get on the faculty?

EB: (Laughs over words) I can see that doesn't answer your question.

PJK: Well, it begins to, though, and I think that perhaps by talking about the experience at the California School of Fine Arts, some of this will fill in a little bit.

EB: It makes you more humble in a way, and yet raises your sights in other ways, makes you expect more. That seems like a contradiction. You're more humble about things that you assumed, I guess. These assumptions break down. And the assumptions, I think, have to do with family and place and circumstances, you can make a long list of the external things: I went to Cal, I was a member of this fraternity, I got this -- all these "Good Housekeeping" stamps of approval. All those things start to break down and you become humble about yourself in those terms.



PJK: But you also realize there are more important goals?

EB: Right, right. And I don't know, it seems to me that this would be a case and you would describe it as a case of very delayed maturity. What I've been describing is the kind of thing that should take place much earlier.

PJK: Doesn't often, though.

EB: I like to think that it does with students today, more than it was common with students in my time.

PJK: How would you say this alteration in your world view affected your ideas about art?

EB: Oh, it affected them immensely. I think that art to me had been an external acquisition, again like getting a degree, and you learned those things, and you learned those techniques, you learned these powers of composing and organizing and, to a certain degree, of inventing, certainly you learned stylistic attributes. And then you manipulated all this, very much like a commercial artist in that sense. You didn't dig any further, you didn't come up with things that bewildered you, you didn't traffic in that line. You dealt with things you had full control over, you were certain about. You might even meet deadlines, you were that sure. So there was a complete breakdown of that whole picture, that whole scene and the attitude that surrounded that sort of thing. So art became, then, much more a matter of trying to find out what you wanted to do. Find out who you are and all sorts of things like that.

PJK: Became more of a philosophical activity?

EB: More a questing kind of thing. It had never been that way for me before.

PJK: Did you then arrive at the California School of Fine Arts -- you notice I keep trying to go back to that -- with this altered and expanded view of what art can be and what the role of the artist might be?

EB: No, I arrived there with the altered view that I described, the much more broad thing where the belief in all these things that had been more or less given, these external accomplishments, and these rewards that had been given to me, the belief in that was broken down. So I was prepared to appreciate then what was occurring in the California School of Fine Arts. But in terms of art, I had not anticipated. I was prepared to receive it but it came as a surprise.

PJK: How did you get there, to the California School of Fine Arts?



EB: There was an opening. Somebody had cancelled out, a faculty member had cancelled out at the last minute and they desperately needed somebody. This was during the winter, early '46, and I got tipped off about this by Karl Kasten who was a fellow student of mine at Cal. I rushed over, took some of my work and had a brief interview with Doug MacAgy, and he said, "Show up Monday." I discovered later that the intention was to have me as a stop-gap until they found somebody else. But then as it turned out, they decided I was good enough to hold on to.

PJK: You actually stayed on until 1952.

EB: Yes.

PJK: What about teaching there? Again, the total experience?

EB: Well, the first thing I think I was aware of was how open the place was and how, well it was very intense, very high spirited. It's as though there were a lot of students there who were very conscious of having taken time out or lost time out from major pursuits and major concerns of a personal nature, certainly, in the war. I felt this way. Maybe I'm projecting this on to other people, but certainly there was that. It put great pressure on to make up for lost time, so to speak. A lot of intensity was born out of this feeling. The freewheeling quality, I think, came from the attitude that there were not really instructors and students as much as there were older artists and younger artists. Now this was very, very different from the university experience. This was more like the whole school was made up of a community of artists, and there was a great deal of exchange across the boards between faculty and students, as much as to say that the students, good students, could influence the faculty. Now that would never...in a more structured situation where you have professors and students. There was a great deal of openness between the faculty members, too, where we'd go around visiting one another's studios and commenting on one another's work. David Park and Hassel Smith and I and later on Diebenkorn, we did this kind of thing of going around to one another's studio. There was much mutual trust, much mutual regard. Nobody was climbing over anybody, nobody was trying to be top dog by climbing over somebody else.

PJK: Sounds idyllic.

EB: It was.

PJK: And unusual.

EB: Very unusual, very unusual. So you're in a community of peers without the usual hierarchy.





PJK: I have a number of questions, of course, to ask you about this period. I'm very interested in your relationship to other faculty members which you already indicated to a certain extent. But the nature of that relationship, the extent of sharing of ideas, and basically the makeup of this artistic community at the California School of Fine Arts. Was it a very close relationship? Did you feel that you were participating in something together other than teaching at the same place?

EB: Well, yes and no. I mean, there's a strong feeling of individuality, and yet, I mean it would be like a community of monks and I'm sure they would insist they all pray in their own individual way (Laughs) but they're still a community of monks and there's certainly an identity they have as a community as opposed to the outside world. I would say that the Art Institute is best described in those terms. There was this very strong internalization, I think, of what you would speak of as art directions, art styles, art tendencies. But, for example, to go to the Oakland Museum and see this show in 1945 and then the years, 1950 and so forth, you're removed in time. That was once a part of your world you're removed from. You look back on it, you identify it stylistically, it begins to become like a costume, you see. This is not to downgrade it. This is true of any art, it's inevitable it's going to have some slight look, even though it might be slight, some look of being dated of a particular time. On the other hand, when we were doing that, when we were creating that, it had a timeless and universal feeling. It's as though you're talking to all mankind over the face of the globe. (laughs)

PJK: Forever.

EB: Forever. Right, right. Now you look back and it's not that. So that there is this kind of, more so I think than exists now, this enormous idea, enormous sort of feeling, unlimited, unbounded feeling about what was being done. This is accompanied by an idealism and I guess you could say the idealism came after the war, in many ways. It wasn't just in the art realm, the United Nations and all the idealism about that and the expectation about a better world and the brotherhood of mankind and, I don't know. I suppose this existed to a degree after the First World War, didn't it? All sorts of marvelous thoughts for peace on earth and the brotherhood of man, everyone marching arm in arm into the sun.

PJK: What did this attitude have to do with non-objective painting, abstract expressionism that is so closely identified now with the MacAgy years at that institution? As a matter of fact it seems to be, in some respects, we look back on it now and seems almost to be like the only course on the menu. Was this true?



EB: You mean the abstract expressionism?

PJK: Exactly. It seems that almost everybody -- I perhaps didn't state that very clearly. I'm asking several things. First of all, was abstract expressionism, non-objective painting pretty much the bill of fare back then?

EB: Yes, it was, yeah.

PJK: Then what did this have to do, if anything, with this new idealism? Do you see any relationship there? Do you have any insights on that?

EB: Well, I think the forms that emerged on the canvas were looked upon as gestures that almost embodied a language, almost embodied a sign language, potentially readable by anybody. The assumption was made that there was nothing esoteric and nothing secret about what was being done, about the world of paint and shapes and so forth. That this was innocent and direct and available as anything could possibly be. Looking back on it now, of course, one doesn't see it this way, one sees it as very sophisticated and involving a great deal of specialized appreciation. You have to look at a lot of it, you have to see a lot of it before you're in a position to appreciate what is going on. But when it was created, it wasn't seen that way, it wasn't regarded in that light at all. These were gestures of freedom to a certain extent. Rothko speaks of that. There are quotes from Rothko when he speaks of this power to stretch one's arms and be free and so forth, as though this was partly against the repressive tendency, if not very covert, just in society itself. Conservativisms of society bringing about restrictions of one kind and another, and here was a rebellion against these restrictions. Maybe we've been rebelling against the restrictions of the war and so forth. So there's this power and these attributes that abstract expressionism -- now we speak of it as abstract expressionism, it wasn't seen that way, it wasn't talked about that way. It was more a matter of coming alive on the canvas, and now we talk about it as abstract expressionism. Very special way of coming alive. But I'm sure what I'm saying would be true of the attitude of Jackson Pollock, you know, these were things he was doing on the canvas. And more emphasis on process, you see, because the process as it goes to the product -- and in that light what I was saying earlier about being educated at the Art Institute, then called the California School of Fine Arts, 50% of my art education taking place there had to do with that switch from an emphasis on products to an emphasis on process. The kind of search in process that goes on in doing an abstract expressionist painting, very, very strong influence.



It's as though you're saying, "I don't know how" as opposed to "I know how." It's saying, "I don't know how and I don't know what I'm going to find out, how I'm going to find --" And this expectation might involve one blessed moment of self-transcendence where suddenly, miraculously you find out how and you find out what on the canvas. But this is all in process. It's just like Paul on the road to Damascus. Now, there's process, you see. (laughs) He doesn't know what and he doesn't know how. He falls down and he gets up transformed, right?

PJK: That's a revealing analogy you've made there: St. Paul. Was this your experience? Did you just all of a sudden, then, encounter by being present at the California School of Fine Arts in early 1946, this shift to an emphasis on process? Were there abstract expressionist, non-objective models, then, around you? How did this happen? It couldn't have happened just all at once.

EB: Um, well. It happened very quickly. It did. It really happened very quickly. I guess part of it was the influence we had on one another, part of it was out of the general spirit of things and a lot of the credit has to go to MacAgy who had gotten together this particular combination of people on the faculty, and we were very fortunate then to have these marvelous students. Lots of schools had GIs. You talk to anybody who taught at that time, taught the GIs, they say, "Yes, they were marvelous." They were very, very energetic, they were very spirited, they were very determined, they were very serious, very much in earnest.

PJK: Probably trying to catch up.

EB: Tremendous sense of purpose. Trying to catch up is why.

PJK: But how did this happen? Looking back, can you at all reconstruct this process that led to essentially a new style and certain new attitudes about art?

EB: Well, this was influenced, of course, by the East. There was an awareness, certainly, of what was going on in the East.

PJK: And so then these new forms, new styles, were looked to as appropriate means to express new ideas that were shared by you and your colleagues?

EB: Yeah. This was not anything really new. I'm sure when artists went to Paris and discovered impressionism, they thought this to be maybe very much the same way. This was an innocence. So you take the impressionist versus the product of the academy, the fellow at the academy reeks of learning, reeks of labor, reeks of discipline, very demonstrably, this guy has all this technical facility and it





took years to acquire that. There're some instances still where the art form carries with it that sort of look. Here I'm talking about art forms and I jump to a circus act. When you look at a circus act, up there on that tightrope, there's discipline. There's...grueling hours of training and discipline. In another way entirely, you go to a concert and hear a concert pianist. This is not done overnight. This is obviously done with a tremendous amount of discipline. There're art forms that carry with them a traditional look of great skill, great technical mastery, great self-control, all of this sort of thing. Ballet still has that. Painting in the academy has it. They attempt this with contemporary Russian art. You go to a Russian exhibit, it attempts the same kind of thing. There's a morality attached to it, you're really demonstrating this self-discipline, I suppose is the real morality. Every dictatorship wants art to convey this to the populace. Imagine coming into impressionism then, what a liberation that is. It seems like it's so direct that everybody will be able to understand the generosity, the courage, the spiritedness, the immediacy, the candidness, the thereness, the images on that canvas, all these things. And you go up to an impressionist painting and it's obviously pigment on a piece of cloth. You go up to an academic painting, and they don't want you to ever think this is pigment on a piece of cloth. That's utterly the wrong feeling. It's not to be seen that way at all, not to reveal its true nature in that way. And I'm sure the cubist painting must have been tremendously vitalizing, a tremendously exciting thing to artists first discovering the cubists. Imagine Mondrian goes to Paris 1910, 1911, around in there, and from a landscape painter overnight he is converted to a cubist point of view. This I don't think is any different from those experiences so that it would have the same source of virtues to the artist. It's opening up tremendous possibilities, it's a freeing of one's self from the shackles of the past, it's a liberation from dead forms -- that's the negative side. And again on the positive side it promises a kind of a new awareness. And because of its innocence, because of its sort of naked presence it also promises its availability to your fellow man, breaks out of the realm of just the artist and presents itself as being available to your fellow man although it doesn't turn out that way.

PJK: So there's a notion of democracy that underlies?

EB: Yeah, I think so. In the case of Mondrian, he wrote in ways that indicate that he expected his art, not to bring about strictly a new and better world, but to participate, to be very much at home in a new and better world. This is economically, socially, every which way a happier human existence on earth. Well, we didn't talk about that kind of thing at the school. I think that one would be a little





embarrassed to speak in those terms directly, but underlying it all I think was that feeling; it was an optimism and an idealism and all sorts of trusts and expectations that seem to me to be completely out of the question now.

PJK: Well, who were the important figures in these new developments in your opinion? Of course Clyfford Still is very much given the lion's share of the credit for bringing this new style, the new approach to the California School of Fine Arts. Would you agree with that? Was he the critical figure? What about some of the other factors?

EB: Well, when I first was there, this is January of '46, Clyfford Still wasn't there. When I first arrived there, it struck me as an amazingly productive and amazingly spirited place. David Park was already there, Hassel Smith was already there, Clay Spohn was very influential.

PJK: Were they painting non-objective pictures?

EB: Oh yes.

PJK: What we call now abstract expressionist pictures?

EB: Well, yes. I'm trying to think what David Park was doing, what painting he was doing in early '46, whether it was a more formalistic thing than he later got into, I think it might have been at this point. But the students, I remember John Grillo, I remember he was a very much of a hot shot as a student there and he was painting these non-representational abstract expressionist paintings at that point. There were other students. It was by no means a dead place. It didn't have to wait for Clyfford Still to come along for it to come to life. It was already very much alive and kicking.

PJK: Well then what was, in your opinion, Clyfford Still's role? What did he contribute?

EB: He had a very strong moral stance, a very uncompromising and stern posture. I don't think there were many artists -- in other words, I think he was stern enough so there'd be very, very few artists of the past on his list. Very, very few. And I think he was kind of unique in that sense as a purist. The virtue of this was that he instilled in the people, the students that became attached to him, that followed him, a tremendous feeling of purpose, a tremendous feeling of rectitude that carried for a long stretch of time. He was inspirational in this way. And from my understanding, he wouldn't spend much time criticizing individual paintings but he would be talking about attitudes, point of view, frame of mind and stance that the artist should take, and talking about the pitfalls and the enemies that exist in the world that the artist has to watch out for, especially in the market. And dealers (laughs).



PJK: Hasn't changed much on that score. So you then feel that Still's primary contribution was inspirational perhaps more than providing a stylist model?

EB: Well, he certainly provided his work, provided that for a number of students. No, I would certainly have to say that. His work was influential in that regard. I think Clyfford Still's contribution was a very valuable one. The only point I would question is whether or not the school would have existed without him, and I would argue that it certainly would have existed without him. I don't think there would have been all that great a change if there had been no Clyfford Still ever, but this is not to say that he did not make a contribution. I just don't think he made the school. I think there are some that would argue that he made it. (laughs) Until he appeared there was nothing, you know, it was a garbage dump, until he touched it with his magic wand.

PJK: I also gather that you feel the ultimate source of abstract expressionism was New York, that at least the seeds came from New York and from experiments that were already going on there.

EB: Oh, yes. I wouldn't at all want to maintain that if there were no New York, there would have been the school as it was, no. I wouldn't maintain that. If there were no New York, it could be that a lot of this would have emerged in the preceding form, which would have been cubism, you see. Basically this was an anti-cubist move and derived much more from Eastern European sources, more specifically a person like Kandinsky was much more of a hero and Picasso was not, Braque was not. This was a moving away from the French and the French rationalism, French cubism, towards this art which partly stems then from the relative automatism of the person like Kandinsky. Also I would say influenced by surrealist sources.

PJK: By adopting a non-objective approach, not a figurative approach, the abstract expressionist style, you were rebelling against what had been very dear to you. You were rebelling against cubism.

EB: Right, right.

PJK: So this represented a revolt in a sense.

EB: Right. Oh, yeah.

PJK: Probably for most of the others, certainly those who had been trained at Cal.

EB: Yes.



PJK: And I guess most of the other schools at that time?

EB: Well, that's true, yeah. How many of the artists, though, start out with cubism or some form of Picasso? You go back to Gorky's background and you get real cubism and things à la Picasso and then a period where Gorky is obviously influenced by surrealism, very strongly influenced by surrealism and then eventually emerges into something less obviously, less conspicuously surrealism. So this kind of a transition from an early phase born out of cubism is pretty familiar.

PJK: What about the other faculty members? You acknowledge Still's important contribution, that his presence did have something to do with it. But I also gather that you feel there were others who were perhaps equally important to the atmosphere at the school. Which ones would you site as particularly important?

EB: Park and Hassel Smith and Clay Spohn I'd say primarily.

PJK: And why?

EB: Well, I just felt that their presence and the evidence of their presence in the work of the students, the evidence of their presence in the spirit and the attitude that prevailed at the school was pretty marked, it was pretty strong. Of course, as I say, I had direct, very direct contact with Hassel Smith and David Park, and not with Clay Spohn. I never had contact with him socially except an occasional party. I was not good friends with Clay Spohn, but I think he had a very strong presence and there was a good deal of socializing. I did mention the studio visits. These studio visits were not something that all the faculty participated in obviously. I mean, it wasn't a formal thing, certain people that you fell in with, who were particularly sympathetic with your work, and you'd find yourself setting up some kind of casual program of going around and having lunch and seeing what the work was in the studio. Aside from that, there were lots of parties. Parties were very, very popular and Doug MacAgy was always having a cocktail party for no particular reason at all, just a get-together. And then there were dances, it wasn't long before a band started up at the school, and these dances were something to see. Faculty came too and the students came to them and everybody enjoyed them. They were very high-keyed, spirited affairs. I think that they reflected some of the kind of democratic and open and all-around responsiveness of the people at the school. Certainly it's the first time I'd encountered anything that was as fun-loving, as informal as these dances were. Sometimes I wonder if the early days, say the first four or five years of the German Bauhaus when they had a jazz band going and apparently a lot of partying, wasn't somewhat similar to this situation.





PJK: Sounds to me, though, as if all of you -- students and teachers alike -- did have a sense of your own community, and perhaps the importance of what you were doing. Or that you were involved in something special. You mentioned socializing, you mentioned certain faculty members acting in the community, criticizing one another's work, talking about art, sharing ideas. And this leads me to believe there was indeed a sense that something special was going on and that it somehow came to focus on abstract expressionist painting.

EB: Yes. Well, that's true. It depends on what you mean by "special," though. While I say there were these great expectations, you have to keep in mind these expectations existed in a certain realm. This is part of a whole transformation of attitude that took place in me. This realm had nothing to do with success in the marketplace, nothing to do with success in ordinary, everyday terms. When you painted or when you sculpted, you fully expected that your paintings would just pile up in your studio, your sculpture would just pile up in the back yard or wherever it is. Never was there any expectation that this would go beyond the fringe that came in and saw it and appreciated your work. That was it. Your own appreciation and the appreciation of a few colleagues, that was it, that was the end.

PJK: There certainly wasn't any local market at that time.

EB: There was no local market. This did induce some, what would be called carelessness in the materials. If you don't think this product of yours is ever going to go beyond serving the immediate purposes that I mentioned, living the short and rather limited life that I mentioned, then you're not pouring your money into the very best paints, the very best this, and you're not being very careful, maybe, about the mixture of your materials and so forth that go into the product.

PJK: But that's a liberating attitude in itself.

EB: Sure.

PJK: Then you're much more involved with process than product.

EB: Right, right. That's true, yeah.

PJK: Let me ask you a couple of questions, getting back specifically to you and your own experience. I wonder if you can remember the circumstances surrounding the creation of your first non-figurative painting, and what occasioned that remarkable shift.

EB: Well, things generally happen by a relatively slow, gravitating process, and I think rarely is it the case that you jump suddenly into painting a different way overnight.





PJK: But do you recognize or do you acknowledge one figure, one of your colleagues or some model you were looking to in connection with --

EB: There were a whole bunch of models, I would say, because of all this art going on, plus models from afar like New York reproductions, work from these artists, or whatever. All of this was very much influential. I wouldn't be able to single out any. I would say that in the long run, I'm more drawn to the work of Rothko than I was of Clyfford Still. But then I would have to say, too, I was influenced by the immediate work going on, I was influenced by the attributes of Hassel Smith, certain attributes of David Park's work, and a little less Clay Spohn. It would be a big combination of this.

PJK: Is it possible at all to isolate any of those aspects which attracted you? You say you were attracted to aspects of David Park's work. What were those aspects?

EB: Well, the aspects were physicality. I don't think this would be true of, say, Rothko. There was a physicality in his work in paint. His movements of the pigments, the quality, I think this had a very strong effect. An effect a little bit like expressionism's effect 'cause there you've got a very powerful presence, very powerful material presence generally of the painting itself. The aspects of Hassel Smith would be a marvelous kind of slapstick quality of humor, tremendous inventiveness, of rambunctiousness in his work, physical in a very different way than Park is physical. He makes Park look very serious. Hassel was very sportive, very athletic generally speaking, on canvas. Rothko, I think especially of the earlier Rothko. They had a painting for a long time at the San Francisco museum called Three Figures by the Sea, and this is a mythological style. Are you familiar with the earlier Rothko, these marks and lines around as opposed to the divisions that later set in? I thought the earlier style was absolutely tremendous, I was very, very taken with that. And I guess the mystery. A tremendously mysterious painting, very present and very mysterious. It was this aspect that really captivated me about the Rothko. Full of suggestions. Tremendous power of suggestion, very poetic. The Rothko seemed loaded with overtones, more so than with Hassel's work or David Park's work. So each of these would have its own predominant characteristic that I happened to single out and I happened to be particularly susceptible to.

PJK: What about your own teaching at that time? You were obviously now moving into a situation where you were dealing with much more serious students than you had to bluff back in high school. So it must have been an entirely different experience with older students. Are there any students of these years -- I'm sure there are -- who are the students that you remember that maybe you gained something from or that you would single out.



EB: You mean not necessarily students that I had. I remember Ernie Briggs and from a distance -- I never had him as a student -- Dugmore. Both of them very impressive people. I mentioned John Grillo, he was very impressive as a student.

PJK: Was he a student of yours? Was he in any of your classes?

EB: Don't recall his ever being enrolled, actually, in a class, no. I don't think he was ever enrolled in a class that I taught. Who else might there be at that time? Can't think of any others that I had direct contact with.

PJK: What about the classes you taught?

EB: Drawing and painting. And an occasional colored ~~xx~~ class. It would be beginning. We taught all across the board. We'd teach beginning or advanced students, switch around, do one level and then we'd also teach night classes. It was very popular at that time to teach night classes because the students at the night classes were just as good as the day students. The night students were at the same level. It's not like walking into a night class where you had a bunch of old ladies.

PJK: How would a life drawing class fit into the --

EB: Maybe I ought to take that "old ladies" out.

PJK: How would a life drawing class fit into the program at California School of Fine Arts at that time? Did you teach life drawing?

EB: Yeah.

PJK: So you or the faculty still felt this kind of training was important although almost everybody was painting non-objectively?

EB: Oh yes.

PJK: You saw no conflict? You'd feel this was important still?

EB: Yes, because it was taken as a learning process, taken as a disciplinary process, taken as a way of expanding your vision, too, increasing your resourcefulness about form ideas. It had a whole bunch of other virtues attached to it.

PJK: Was it required?

EB: I'm trying to recall whether it was optional or required, whether it was elective or not. I don't recall whether it was required or an elective.



PJK: That would be interesting to check up on, to see, because I'm just sort of wondering if a student could have, at that time, or any time but especially then, enrolled and immediately started expressing himself/herself in doing abstract expressionist paintings.

EB: Oh, yes, I'm sure.

PJK: In other words, did the school's faculty feel it was important to...or was there a progression involved in coming to that point?

EB: Oh yes, there were beginning courses that you were obliged to take. You could start painting as a freshman. Now this is not true of most university departments, you start with black and white, then next you take courses in color, and then you paint on canvas, you know, meaning that this is a magnus opus to a degree, this is your poem, this is where you try to put everything together, as opposed to: this is an exercise; as opposed to: this is a class assignment. Generally speaking, all the work in the first two years in the university program was class assignments. You're not allowed to put things together, to write a poem or novel or short story in paint, until you're a junior. Well, at the San Francisco Art Institute, it was possible to have painting right off. So while you were taking beginning courses, in your painting course you might be doing non-representational work. Which I think is a very, very good scheme. Right off, you are saying, "This is not a matter of learning things and then later learning how to use them," which I think is a very, very dangerous process. It's like going to a finishing school, learning manners that have nothing to do with you as a person. You have to then go through the process of assimilating this, finding out how you're going to use this and putting it to some degree of testing right from the very beginning. Students complained about some departments where there's too much of the attitude of "we don't care how you use this. We're giving you the fundamentals, we're giving you this basic training. After you get out four years hence, five years hence, then it's up to you, that's your baby what you make of this." I've heard the music department at Cal is criticized for -- I don't know if it's changed or not, but criticized for being of this nature. So you're really producing archivists and historians.. That kind is fine, but it's only part of the scheme of things.

PJK: In connection with the teaching program at the California School of Fine Arts at the time, how would a teacher criticize, on what basis would a teacher criticize non-objective painting? Now remembering, of course, that this was all quite new and all of a sudden you were confronted with something that hadn't been part of your own training experience, it seems to me certain standards or certain means of criticism had to be developed and developed pretty quickly. Can you enlighten me on that?





EB: (Laughs) Somebody had to come out with a rule book in a hurry. Well, no. You, if you were a teacher there, according to your own capacities and responsiveness, capacity for growth and so forth, you acquired over I think a fairly short period of time -- maybe you're in a state of bewilderment we'll say for a year, now that's a long time. When I say short period, long period, I'm speaking in these terms. A year's a fairly long period of time. But because you're pretty much surrounded by it, because you're pretty much immersed in this and you're seeing example after example of your own students and you see in the hallways of some peoples' classes as well as in the museums and reproductions and so forth, you get a real crash course. I think you quickly get on to what is being mouthed, what a cliché is, what a platitude is, what is lacking in imagination, what is timid. All these qualities that we don't prize in life begin to reveal themselves. And then the opposite reveals itself, too, so if you have work that strikes you as being very strong and original and courageous, adventuresome, spirited, on and on and on, and which really gives you a lift, really makes a contribution to your own feeling, your own thinking, as opposed to dragging you down or boring you or making you feel "Oh, my God, not again." And I don't think that it's long before you begin to form your own kind of capacity to evaluate, I think, very legitimately evaluate the work of people. I find that the concurrence of the faculty about work is very high for a great percentage in the middle bracket. The work is middling. If the work is very, very bad, there's generally a high concurrence, but there can be cases where a faculty member says, "Gee, that's pretty good." (laughs) It's because it's out of the common rut. It's amazing how much of it falls into a common rut where it's not difficult to spot this as mouthing something you've heard many times before. But if the work is very, very good, there can be high concurrence there, but again like the work that's very, very bad, there might be some people that don't like it because it's slick or it's professional or something of this kind. You get into this.

PJK: Well let me ask you this also. Did you find yourself discussing at the early stage with your colleagues what makes for a good abstract expressionist picture?

EB: No, no.

PJK: I mean, it just seemed a natural extension then of your own backgrounds or that it was self-evident.

EB: A good non-representative, a good abstract expressionist painting is one that knocks your hat off.

PJK: It's that simple?

EB: Right.





PJK: And it didn't really call for discussion?

EB: It's outside of that. It's like Louis Armstrong said about jazz, "If you have to ask what it is, you never get to know." I think that the discussing and analyzing is most helpful and most pertinent to mediocre work. What I mean to say by that is that it's possible, I think, that a person can be dislodged from a mediocre realm by analysis and criticism of the work. I think you must have felt this about people who have potential, that under the right circumstances, something would really, really happen. Now most of the people, you feel this isn't so. I don't mean you're right or wrong in either case, but you feel this. If I think it actually exists, (I don't mean that I'm necessarily right or my guess is,) under the right circumstances and pushed in the right direction, some people you feel are going to profit if you give them a good stiff kick. Some people are going to profit if you give them some gentle pats. But there are cases, I think, when I see a painting that knocks my hat off, I don't feel like criticizing or analyzing or discussing it. It just doesn't lend itself to those kind of things.

PJK: What interests me is at a time when you and others were involved in a rather different art form, you describe it as a break, a very exciting adventure, but you apparently didn't find yourself in completely unfamiliar territory, if you see what I mean. Apparently some of the same things, your equipment could be used, could be applied here. So in a sense there was more of a continuity than perhaps we sometimes think. This is what I was getting at -- you didn't feel the need to try to define what was involved. Maybe only art historians do that, do it verbally. I'm interested in what you have to say about this.

EB: Well, but again, don't you think that this has happened over and over again? I mentioned artists coming from the outside to Paris during the period of impressionism. If they came into contact and were susceptible to the work of the impressionists, it must have really caught fire in very much the same kind of way, they'd make the same kind of translation from their background and so forth. Think of a man, for example, in relation to cubism, like Marc Chagall who comes to Paris, and his marvelous early cubistic paintings when he was in Paris, these marvelous cubistic things. Well, there is a bringing of that particular background which was not cubism, with his own background, and being able to translate in very short, very effective, very unflinching terms. I think that the greatest difficulty would occur if one is not involved in the painting as a thing in itself. For example, it seems like the person who has a background in illustration would have a very difficult time making this translation of whatever powers he has, whatever know-how he has, to whatever new thing he comes upon. But the training at Cal was not



illustrational, the training at Cal was the concern about the picture, the concern about the formal qualities of the picture and so forth. In that sense, you could say it's a broad training, a broad background that would prepare you well for being susceptible to whatever vital things come along and strike you.

PJK: What about a philosophical basis for abstract expressionist gestural painting? Is this something that was discussed over and over again as it apparently was in New York at the time? Would you say that there was a similar phenomenon around the California School of Fine Arts where the painting was really more than painting? Or at least apparently that was the case where there were philosophical underpinnings for it all.

EB: No, MacAgy was to a degree interested in that. I remember at one point he was very keen about Collingwood[?], who was an English esthetician and wrote a book called Principles of Art. He's written other books, too, but MacAgy was interested in this. And he spoke about it. He was enthusiastic about it. But I don't recall it ever catching on and then ever becoming something that the faculty members engaged in. I don't think there was that kind of a bent, generally speaking, amongst the faculty. I think that would be a little too self-consciously intellectual to appeal to the faculty. Furthermore, I think it would have linked the work with the kind of exclusiveness that was not wanted, not part of the outlook.

PJK: Did you ever sit in on any sessions with Clyfford Still? Sort of informal where you chatted?

EB: No.

PJK: Was he somewhat unapproachable?

EB: Yes. Very much so.

PJK: So he probably didn't really have a very close relationship with other faculty members?

EB: No, he didn't. I'd say inaccessible, but I'm sure some of the students would say that's not true at all.

PJK: But maybe his contact was much more with the students than with --

EB: Yes, it was.

PJK: Was Frank Lobdell on the faculty then or was he a student?

EB: He was a student. Frank and Jack Jefferson.



PJK: Diebenkorn?

EB: Diebenkorn became a student while I was there.

PJK: Was Diebenkorn ever a student of yours?

EB: No. David Park but not Frank or Diebenkorn.

PJK: How do you remember Richard Diebenkorn's student abstract expressionist work?

EB: Well, I remember him very much as one of the outstanding students, in the same category as these other people that I mentioned, although I was more aware of these others than I was of Diebenkorn at the time, and came to know him later on mainly through David Park and studio visits and drawing sessions and that kind of thing that we participated in. That's how I got to know him.

PJK: We were talking about the faculty at the California School of Fine Arts during the MacAgly years and the undeniable impact of Clyfford Still's arrival on the scene, a special role that he played in terms of representing sort of a New York connection. And perhaps even assuming a position for some as larger than life. How did other faculty members respond to this? Was there perhaps any kind of resentment of this or antagonism that developed as a result?

EB: Well, it was a change from what had existed at this school from my first days there, the kind of availability, the amicability, mutual regard between the faculty members. It was a very conspicuous fact -- to me it was. I'd never experienced anything like that before, any situation where there was such a freedom from hierarchies of one kind or another. And Clyfford Still did represent a break from this, he did regard himself as something removed and superior, and obviously this would bring about some kind of reaction on the part of the rest of the faculty. Still did form a group of students that was a kind of a circle, again removed, from the rest of the student body. These people saw themselves as a favorite group, closely connected with the master. To a certain extent, he was the creator of a small school within a school. That was something new and something that was not at all characteristic of the school that I had known. I don't know, the degree to which it was actually giving rise to resentment would be hard to say. There's not any clear picture in my mind that would provide evidence of this, anything as strong as resentment. David Park had, to a certain extent, authoritarian tendencies; he was a strong-willed person; he was, in the classroom, that way; his students often spoke of him in those terms, they liked him immensely, he was a very effective teacher, he was an excellent teacher, but he had this kind of tendency and there could possibly have been some feeling on his part in regard to Still that would have been something





less than warm and receptive and friendly. But David was not anything -- David was a gregarious person, he made himself present and available and was very warm towards people as a general sort of a tendency, not just a select few but to people in general. He was responsive and it was not hard to engage David in all sorts of situations. I remember he even undertook at one point, the assistant directorship of a summer session which most of the teachers wouldn't touch at all, they didn't want to have their summers gobbled up with administrative work. But this is something Still would never have done. So while there was a big difference between Park and Still, there was at the same time this thing in probably being somewhat authoritarian and demanding from friends and from students a degree of obedience, we'll say, obedience to their wishes which was not necessarily the practice of most of the faculty or the way of most of the other faculty.

PJK: Would you go so far as to say that there were for a while, two camps, then, at the California School of Fine Arts?

EB: Well, I can't say there were two camps because there was not a counterpart to the Clyfford Still group, the Clyfford Still circle. There was no "David Park circle," nothing of that nature. Clyfford's was more of a closed off, shut off situation, whereas the rest of the faculty, the rest of the student body was not fractured in that sense. There was no other camp. Now, it could be that later on, historically, all sorts of pictures could form in peoples' minds, especially outsiders, people who had nothing to do with us, would begin to see two very strongly defined, strongly opposed camps. Clyfford Still's camp on the one hand and the -- what on the other, I don't know.

PJK: David Park?

EB: David Park, yeah, something like that. It didn't exist at the time any more than there was a Clyfford Still camp and a Hassel Smith camp, or a Clyfford Still camp and a Clay Spohn camp. Nothing of that kind existed.

PJK: Well, of course, David Park and you, for that matter, are very much associated with a development, a phenomenon that came to be called Bay Area Figurative Painting, essentially a return to the figure, to representation by employing the, we'll say, brushwork of abstract expressionism. Certain aspects of abstract expressionism were then applied to the figure. And I believe that David Park abandoned non-objective painting around 1950 and you returned to the figure perhaps two years later. It seems, again looking back historically, that Park and several of his colleagues (including you) at the California School of Fine Arts reacted against what Clyfford Still stood for and what had been a very attractive and very exciting event at the California School of Fine Arts. It seems to me that that could bear some analysis. It's an interesting development.





EB: Well you say, what Clyfford Still stood for. Say what the whole group stood for since '46, since I was there. So Clyfford Still was one of the practioners, we'll say, his body of ideas we were all involved in. And the question arises, "Why switch away or turn away at this particular 'ism' and...so forth? Why a change in attitude beginning at that time?" So taking it from a personal point of view, you could say, I think, that a certain amount of this must necessarily be a case of obviously cooling off to a certain degree in a belief, or a certain degree in a trust. Certainly there was a loss of urgency and also a sense of purpose in the particular forms that were involved in one's own work while pursuing an abstract expressionist direction. That's all putting it in a negative point of view. When that happens, there is this kind of a sense that things can no longer go on in this particular way. If one allows them to go on in this particular way, one is simply being enslaved, one is becoming the victim of stylistic tendencies, and one is running the risk of mouthing something that is not meant. Then you're wide open to some other set of possibilities that presents itself. Now, the other extreme or what one can see as another extreme from abstract expressionism would be working with a figure. There, you're starting with something that is given rather than starting with something that is not at all given, or you don't feel it's given. In abstract expressionism the possibilities are wide open, but the minute you start in figurative painting, there are certain things you can do and certain things you can't do unless you're engaged in fantasy, and this was not fantasy. You can't have things floating around in the air. You have to have a ground plane for them to stand on. The ground plane has to end someplace. It can end in atmosphere but it might end when it comes up to a wall, the ground plane ends and there's a wall. Or it might end where it comes to the ocean, or the horizon rather, and then something else sets in, the sky. So that you have all these kinds of conditions that exist that didn't and don't exist with abstract expressionism. Then it seems more humble in a sense. If one has cooled off with the abstract expressionist idea, meaning that one no longer believes in it as a language, then no one any longer believes in its communicative potential, then it seems like it's pretentious, then it seems like it's very elitist, then it seems like it's very esoteric and very unapproachable by anybody but the initiated.

PJK: Are you saying that you came to that point?

EB: Yes, because you see, I think that's the sort of thing that's like falling out of love. Automatically this would bring a lot of these questions and doubts to mind.



And then it becomes, as I say, pretentious in that sense. It seems inauthentic, it seems cooked up. And the thought of starting with something external such as an apple on the table presents itself as a very strong alternative.

PJK: What do you think about chronology in this particular development? I mean, the fact is -- at least we're told the fact -- that David Park abandoned non-objective painting in 1950 and returned to the figurative. David Park, we've determined, was a very important presence at the school, I guess in the Bay Area, and certainly for you and several others. How then, would you describe his role in this new development?

EB: Oh, very influential.

PJK: I mean, was it a matter of watching David Park take these steps and then -- I don't want to say following -- but finding, establishing that understanding that this was a profitable direction to follow? Again essentially, how did it happen?

EB: It's hard to say how much of that, you know, was influential, how much of a role it plays. Certainly you would have to credit him with playing a role, a pretty considerable role. The kind of enthusiasms that I generated right off in my own work were not necessarily his enthusiasms. I was keen about artists that he was not too keen about and I assimilated them in color and form, in my own particular way so that there was -- but here, I don't think you're really asking that question. You're asking, "Here's a pioneer movement made by this individual and he sort of breaks the ground so there's a showing of the way, an opening up of this possibility."

PJK: Is that true?

EB: I think that is probably true. Right.

PJK: Paul Mills, of course, in 1957 put together an exhibition at the Oakland Museum entitled "Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting," the catalogue for which is quite rare now. But at any rate, this is very early on. And I think later on we might have occasion to talk about that, just how it happened. I think it's very interesting and important. But in this immediate connection, I'd like to read a very short quote that's attributed to David Park by Paul Mills, and then get your response to it. He says here, "The line of demarcation is often thin. The line between non-objective painting and figurative painting is no different than the line between still life and portrait paintings, and I don't think there's any idea of progress involved. Some painters talk as though progress was a kind of duty and that non-objective or some other kind of painting is progressive. I think concepts of progress in painting are rather foolish." Would you agree with that? I think the main point here, actually,



is the difference he draws between non-objective and figurative painting. Or the fact that he really didn't see a difference, in other words?

EB: Well, that is certainly at variance with other things that have been said, a difference in the premise of figurative and non-figurative painting. The nonrepresentational, say, or abstract expressionist if you want to use the more specific term, is automatically a more inner thing at the very outset, see. What you are dealing with you assume does not exist in any external form prior to your dealing with it. Certainly the kinds of relationships that you come up with, the kinds of interactions, correspondences to a form that you come up with don't exist before you. Therefore, all of these results on the canvas, you assume, are unique with that particular canvas, not repeated on another canvas, and it has a particular kind of significance and a kind of potency unto itself. Whereas, in dealing with representational paintings, there's some of what has been said that would be true, but you're starting with things that exist externally to oneself, and you're talking about these things in terms of your response to them. You're not pretending that you're creating them out of the blue or out of your insides. There's a certain degree of that, the fact that you are talking about something which other people can identify, such as an apple or a horse or whatever it happens to be, to a degree it automatically objectifies this and puts you on a basis where you might see that this is the right premise to start with. Maybe it takes pride, maybe it takes a certain degree of pride in the fact that it is relatively selfless, it is kind of saying, "Here is something that exists out in the world that I think is worth dealing with, that I have certain responses to, that I have a certain love for, possibly, and I want to show that in a canvas, I want to show my responses to this in the canvas," as opposed to inventing a brand new language.

PJK: It seems to me, and as a matter of fact this quote surprised me a little bit, assuming it is authentic, because for one thing I think abstract expressionist painting is inherently egocentric. My feeling is that it stems from this, whereas figurative work does incorporate things from -- I don't mean to say from reality -- but from our world, objects from our world and one is dealing with them.

EB: I think the idea of egocentric is a little bit strong. It puts a particular kind of a slant on it and I'm not too sure about that slant. In other words, let's put it this way: Supposing you were to move, we'll say, from a very organic painting that Jackson Pollock did to Mondrian. Now would you say that you're moving from more of an egocentric to less of an egocentric? 'Cause they're both abstract. Would you say that Mondrian is less egocentric than Pollock?

PJK: Yes.





- EB: So you get into this. Of course, Mondrian is not what you'd call abstract expressionism, it's a structuralist type of painting.
- PJK: That I think is a classicism and gets off into a whole other area of the romantic and the classical posture.
- EB: Yeah. So the romantic automatically would be more of the egocentric. So really the difference comes between romantic and classic then, rather than representational and non-representational.
- PJK: Well, of course, I'm creating great problems for myself right there in terms of applying --
- EB: Who's more egocentric? Mondrian or Norman Rockwell? (laughs)
- PJK: But the curious thing, again getting back to this quote, is that Paul Mills -- and I don't expect you to speak for David Park, but it stimulates a response to certain ideas -- to quote Paul Mills, "Park says he felt and still feels that he was making no great departure from what other action painters have been doing." Would you agree with that?
- EB: Well, I guess I'd have to say yes and no. Certain aspects of representational painting, that you call figurative painting, have certain aspects of non-representational action painting, abstract expressionist painting. They have a lot in common. So you'd say yes there. Other aspects are very different. I remember David speaking of a statement of Robert Henri's. Henri was an American impressionist pretty much, and he speaks of the art as being valuable to him as a record of his state of being. The degree to which it records this almost mystical state of being or higher state of awareness, is the degree to which the art is significant, the art is meaningful, the art is important to him. Well, in a sense then, there's not much difference, right, between representational or figurative painting and the abstract expressionist painting. But then if we're talking about the kinds of basic assumptions regarding the mode of painting, abstract expressionist on the one hand and figurative on the other, they're...very, very different. And it's as though a certain kind of a climate might be very supportive of one but not at all supportive of the other. A climate that's supportive of impressionism, say, is a very different climate from one that's supportive of cubism. Impressionism requires, and I think this is important to remember, a fabulous trust of one's senses, a fabulous trust of sensory responses. When you look at those canvases that were created by the impressionists and keep in mind what they were departing from -- a good many of them had an academic training -- and keep in mind the immediate world from which they had emerged, you realize the exceeding daring they had in their use of paint on the canvas. In the same sort of way, a person like Matisse had an absolutely fantastic trust of his own sort of responses, his own immediate responses. To me, cubism on the other hand, doesn't require nearly that degree of trust of your own immediate sensory responses. Cubism could





be plotted out, you can plot out, you can feel your way into it, you can calculate a lot. It invites that sort of thing. Impressionism does not invite calculating at all. Plotting out, no. You can't do it. I think the impressionists realized this. Almost all of them, as you know, brought their paintings back indoors, there's hardly an impressionist who continued painting out-of-doors. They all worked on them as though they were studio paintings. But they realized that in the course of doing this, it was very easy to kill the painting, very easy to move in the direction of the academy and have this full feeling of the vitality and vibrancy of nature, the sense of being out in nature, completely lost and chased out of the painting.

PJK: It interests me that you keep invoking the impressionists as your examples time and time again.

EB: Well, they were the first. You see, they were the first of the modernists.

PJK: Did you personally feel a special relationship to impressionism?

EB: No.

PJK: Or have you ever?

EB: No, not really. See, I think --

PJK: Monet?

EB: Well, I admire them immensely, but no, I don't feel directly affected in my own work like I could point to other artists and say, well yes, certainly directly influenced by Edvard Munch, directly influenced by somebody like Bonnard, who had a lot of impressionist in him, but he was not an impressionist in that sense of the word. But not the impressionists, no. I think that the impressionists were people who had a very particular kind of a talent, I don't think everybody could be an impressionist. I think there had to be a kind of a quick responsiveness, very open and very, very quick responsiveness. I think they had to be able to put two and two together visually without the tremendous amount of snorting around. I have to snort around, make endless alterations and changes, and I don't have the kind of aptitude to make an impressionist.

PJK: Well, ignoring for the moment the scientific basis for impressionism which is one part of a definition-theory-"seeing" and so forth, it does seem to me that you and the other Bay Area figurative painters adopted what we will say were impressionist subjects. Perhaps not for the same reason at all. Why the subjects? Why these particular subjects? Very often, it seems to me looking through catalogs and so forth, everyday subjects, the use of out-of-door figures. Again, maybe you think of Bonnard as an example.



EB: Well, yeah, but look at the figurative paintings of Park or Diebenkorn or myself. I think especially with Park and myself, it seems like there're two categories. There's the subject which may be, in his case, his wife, a friend, a scene indoors in the house, fairly identifiable as to locale and personages and so forth. Then there can be another thing which I think he got more into later on where the figures are obviously an invention and the locale is an invention. It's not his wife, it's not his house, it's not this particular spot and so forth. And I found myself vacillating between these two, except that I never did figurative paintings where the personages were identified or repeated. I never did my wife or I never did any particular room in the house. I did do paintings where that might raise that question -- "Is this that spot on the couch? Is this someone you know?" But this never was the case. And then there're other paintings where obviously this is an invention.

PJK: In the last interview, we ended up talking about the Bay Area figurative painting movement, I guess with a lower case "m" rather than a capital "M" for movement, but anyway, you were beginning, I think, to describe your new relationship to the figure, the new position the figure took in your own work, and the fact that you weren't involved in portraiture in any sense of the word or with specific locale, that it was more a generalized look at nature. Could you clarify that, expand a little bit?

EB: Well, I suppose if you actually go out into nature and start a painting on the scene where the primary response is in the face of a particular scene, as many of the impressionists did, I guess there may have been one or two exceptions, but they all took their paintings back in the studio and worked them over, even though they may have started them outdoors. But if you do the initial activity on the canvas in response to an actual scene in front of you, it would seem that all the more or less conscious introduction, of your art enthusiasms, say your fascination with certain qualities of Goya, your fascination with certain qualities of Roman frescos, or any combination of things, they're going to come in, in a rather minor way. Whereas, I think the way we were working, I think this is true to a degree with David Park and Diebenkorn, was much more complex in its sources, much more complex in its range of basic motivations. A painting could start as a landscape, after it had a figure or two figures added, it could become an interior, or it could end up a landscape with no figures, it could undergo a very, very drastic change which obviously is not going to take place if you're painting a specific scene and you start out in nature dealing with that scene, you intend your painting to depict that scene finally. So as a consequence, the figurative painting, I would say, then could -- and as I mentioned earlier, did sometimes move more towards what you might call everyday actuality and further away from everyday actuality. It could make that kind of a switch back and forth.



PJK: Would you say that the subject matter then really was somewhat incidental or almost accidental? You describe a situation where a single canvas could go through the various stages, transforming from a landscape to an interior and then maybe back again. So it seems to me that subject's almost like serendipity. Would you say that it was found through the process?

EB: Well, this moving from a painting that is basically a landscape to a painting that is basically figurative painting and so forth as I described, was done in an effort to get the painting to work. It wasn't done with a casualness about the material that was being used, but it was done to maintain, we'll say, a certain degree of malleability in the process of developing the painting that would be somewhat comparable to the malleability of the non-representational painting. You see, the opposite of this would be, as I say, you go out in nature and then you stick right with that particular theme. Maybe that particular time of day, even, a certain time of day. Then you are kind of accepting a kind of assignment, so to speak. You try to carry this assignment out. That's one way of proceeding, one way of working. If you, on the other hand, say that what you're undertaking in the painting is from many possible sources, then the painting itself can take many possible directions. That doesn't mean to say that at any one point you may not be very attached, very dedicated to the particular thing you are dealing with, but as much as you might be in love with the landscape, let's say, or the interior with the figures that you generate in the painting, the love of the painting itself, or the success of the painting, the pulling off, so to speak, of the painting itself is even more important.

PJK: Somebody wrote somewhere that there was something of a mythological quality or aspect to your figures, and I guess it was Paul Mills writing in his catalogue as a matter of fact, that you developed your paintings around mythological subjects. Is that right?

EB: Well, not particularly, no.

PJK: How would you --

EB: I never even thought of that as being mythological in actuality. I mean, strictly speaking I never gave any thought to the titles.

PJK: What do you suppose he meant by that? Or do you have any idea? 'Cause I assume this was from conversation with you at the time or some sort of response to the work.

EB: Well, I think part of the figurative feeling, thinking, dealt with universals, and the figurative painting certainly was not interested in being regional, it was not interested in portraying California for Californians. I think I did want to take on some of the universality that was felt to be the realm of the abstract expressionist's work. There were deviations from this as I've already said. Some of the





EB: Well, a bather without a bathing suit, especially.

PJK: That's what I mean. (laughter)

EB: You put a bathing suit on them and it's going to be 1920s or '30s.

PJK: But you stated that you weren't interested in portraiture, these are generalized figures. Was it the figure itself, did you see the human figure as having an evocative character that you specifically were going after in this painting?

EB: Yes.

PJK: Something in a non objective construction canvas was missing.

EB: Yes.

PJK: And so may I suggest then, that there was an element of say, a new humanism or humanistic concern?

EB: Well, that term is used. I'm never quite clear what it means exactly, it's been so used and misused, I suppose. It would have to be laboriously defined before one would know how to take it or how to respond. The demands that the figure makes are conspicuous; every student who begins to draw figures is very much aware of how particular the figure is. You can do lots of things with a tree, you can do lots of things with a chair and infinite things with a cloud, but with a figure it has a particular look to it that insists that it be done in such and such a way, or otherwise it's corny or it looks malformed, cartoonish, idiotic, it has all sorts of registers, very particular registers. Maybe that's why it's still used for life classes for drawing, maybe that's why life classes are still carried on. So, let's see, your question was what? (laughs)

PJK: Well, I've sort of phrased it and rephrased it, elaborated, so it probably got a little bit lost. But I think what I'm interested in is specifically your relationship to the figure. Now, on one hand you say that it poses certain limitations and problems, a sense of discipline, I suppose, that was attractive.

EB: Well, that never attracted me. That aspect never attracted me.

PJK: Well, but that there were limitations then, and that this was a part of the appeal. We talked about this earlier on. So that would suggest to me that this is the reason for the figure rather than its associative value, its standard evocative potential -- we are human beings, we respond in a certain way to the image of the human being, and artists may use the figure. This may be one reason for using the human figure. It's a means of communication, a common denominator, if you see what I mean. It's a loaded subject. It's always recognized.





work that was done was identifiable as subject, but there was this desire at the same time to create a world and to create people in that world which were more timeless, were not fixed in time, were not dated in time. Well, possibly the minute you get into that, the painting has somewhat of a mythological look. I don't know. Some of the paintings may suggest, "Is that supposed to be Adam and Eve?" You know. (laughs)

PJK: But you certainly weren't illustrating standard myths?

EB: No. No.

PJK: Okay. And you weren't basing your work on a system, even a personal mythology, shall we say?

EB: No. You mean by that if someone were to say, "Who are these people?" then you'd be able to answer it in a personal dream-world way.

PJK: Possibly?

EB: No, none of that. It gets very tricky. It gets to be a rather complex kind of thing because you're not working within a tradition that supports that. Like for example, in the Renaissance there was a huge body of visions of the gods and goddesses of Greco-Roman mythology, there's all of this with a Christian iconography that the artist drew on, and he could make his own variations or he could follow in line pretty much with what his predecessors established in this way. Well, here in the case of figurative painting, Bay Area figurative painting, it's more likely when you invent these characters, these figures, these men and these women, mostly women, that they might look a little bit like you or look a little bit like your mother (laughs) or your wife.

PJK: But that isn't what they're about?

EB: But that's not what they're about, no. That just creeps in whether you like it or not.

PJK: Let's try to, without belaboring the point, try to investigate just what those figures are about. Or just what they really meant to you. I mean, the fact is that you with some others returned, embraced once again, the figurative mode, and a tremendous number of the paintings actually do incorporate figures. It's not just representational painting. The figures dominate, often nude, not always, and the bather motif reenters, which along with the nude the landscape, is of course one of the great subjects in the history of western painting. So to a certain extent, it's not specific, if you see what I mean. It's within the space of a tradition that almost maybe moves beyond a subject itself as a painter's tradition.



The nude figure has a special evocative potential and has been used in a number of different ways, including in art of a quality. Does that, for example, come in? Was that of any interest or concern in your work at any point?

EB: Well, evocative to oneself, that --

PJK: I mean more to the audience.

EB: -- certainly that's the important part. But you have to remember that when we were in the throes of the abstract expressionism, that was evocative, that was (laughs) evocative as anything could possibly be. It'd be gestures that you'd put down on the canvas. In other words, what I'm saying is this: The answer to your question, I think, lies precisely in the fact that we were excited, passionate. So whatever you're dealing with, of course it can be the most evocative kind of thing. It cooled off with abstract expressionism. In a sense, the figurative painting was a kind of a revolt, the other extreme from abstract expressionism. So you mention the discipline aspect of it and limitation aspect and so forth, but I don't think that was nearly as important as the positive things, all the potential poetry. This is what you're speaking of when you speak of the evocative powers of that mode of working. This was the thing that was exciting. So sure, it was full of wonder and full of possibilities. Whether or not these potencies would register on the observer was another matter. I don't think there was much concern about that. It was how you felt and how you were responding as an artist in doing this. How alive it made you in the studio, how excited it made you about painting.

PJK: I see. That largely answers my question because it suggests that this then was a primary consideration rather than adopting new tools of communication.

EB: Yes, that's right, that wasn't very important.

PJK: Okay. You had an exhibition at the California College of Arts and Crafts, a one-man show, in January 1956, which --

EB: Arts and Crafts?

PJK: California College of Arts and Crafts, I believe, yeah.

EB: San Francisco Art Institute.

PJK: Well, let me take a look at, uh --

EB: I never have exhibited at the Arts and Crafts. San Francisco Art Association Gallery in San Francisco in '56.

PJK: Okay, I'm sorry. I had that wrong. I'm wondering if it --

EB: Did they make a mistake in the...?



PJK: No, it's correct here. Okay, anyway, then at the California School of Fine Arts Gallery. The importance of that show, I gather, is that you were really the first of the group to have an exhibition, an entire exhibition of figurative work. Is that right?

EB: Well --

PJK: This is pointed to as the first.

EB: -- I'd have to check on that, I don't recall exactly.

PJK: Well, Terry St. John, in his catalogue, cites it that way. I think also in Paul Mills. And of course the Paul Mills show followed only by a year, I think, that particular show. But I gather that this particular exhibition, your exhibition, stimulated a great deal of interest that came as something of a surprise to those who weren't familiar with this. Do you remember it that way?

EB: No, not especially.

PJK: How do you remember it? Perhaps as not all that important?

EB: I remember it as what I felt to be instrumental in getting me a job (laughs) under Gurdon Woods at the Art Institute because it was ~~that~~ fall in '56 after being in Marysville for three years, starting in '53, and then I came down in '56 to join the faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute.

PJK: You had already been a faculty member earlier on.

EB: Right. Earlier on I was, yeah.

PJK: You introduced again this biographical line that we were trying to follow a little bit, and somehow we got to this point where you were returning from Marysville, and we had really never gotten you out of San Francisco. Why don't you, if you could, just briefly fill in the development there and how you happened to leave the Bay Area.

EB: Well, I was working for a year and a half for Railway Express. I looked for a teaching job. I went all the way down to San Diego, as a matter of fact, hitting every place along the way that seemed at all a possibility, and had no success. So I got this job working on the loading trains and trucks and things like that with Railway Express. And virtually driving a truck for Railway Express. So after a year and a half of that, this possibility of a job at the junior college, Yuba College it's called, in Marysville, came up and I took it. This was in the fall of '53 that I started that job. The Railway Express job was pretty exhausting. It took too much energy physically to be a proper part-time job, to do and accomplish a lot in your studio. The best part about the Railway Express job was I got a lot of drawing done. I got painting done, but mostly drawing done.



This was right at the point where I was getting in line with figurative painting and found myself drawing figures at every opportunity. I parked my truck outside of a Foster Cafeteria and sat in the truck with a pencil and pad and spent a lunchtime sometimes taking more lunch than I should, drawing people through the glass, drawing people sitting, having lunch, drinking coffee, chatting at the tables and so forth. Then, as I say, I went up to Marysville, took the job at Yuba College and did a lot of work there. That was a teaching job which took up perhaps 20 and 25 hours a week, left some time over for painting. Best time, of course, was in the summers, and I worked all summer long when I was up there, painting, and would get up during the school year at four o'clock in the morning and work before classes. So this show was the result of a quite intensive period of productivity. And as I say, I think that it had some bearing on my being invited down to the job at the Art Institute. We call it San Francisco Art Institute, we call it California School of Fine Arts, and everybody knows that they're the same place.

PJK: The place changes names periodically.

EB: Well, I think it only changed its name once.

PJK: Well, at least in recent history. Let me ask you this, then. Why did you leave the California School of Fine Arts in '52?

EB: Change of director, Ernest Mundt became the director and he had a very different esthetic from Doug MacAgy. He was beginning to employ his own people, or a faculty that he thought would be more compatible to his purposes at the school. We saw the handwriting on the wall.

PJK: Was there something of a mass exodus? Was there quite a turnover under the new administration?

EB: Ed Corbett had been let go, fired I guess is the correct term for it. This really frightened us because Ed Corbett was very first-rate -- absolutely first-rate artist, first-rate teacher. We were flabbergasted that a man of that caliber would be let go from the school. And rumor had it, I think a very well-founded rumor, that Hassel Smith was going to be the next one to be let go. So David Park and I went to Ernest Mundt and said, "If you fire Hassel, we quit." So he fired Hassel and we quit. (laughs) It's as simple as that.

PJK: You provided him a beautiful setup. He only had to fire one instead of three. What did David Park do after that?

EB: So then I was driving a truck for Railway Express.

PJK: What did Park do? What did Hassel Smith do?





...well, Hassel went up to his orchard in Sebastopol, and, I guess, licked his wounds. I don't know. Then David did various things: he put up liquor displays for some liquor distributor. He did that for a while and some other things, and then eventually, of course, got the job at the University of California.

PJK: What year did he get that?

EB: In fifty-...

PJK: I don't know. We have a letter in the Archives that talks about that. I don't remember. But it seems to me that's fairly --

EB: Oh, it seems to me most of us were sort of foraging around, just finding ways of making ends meet.

PJK: It's interesting, though, that a new administrator would come in and, well maybe this happens more often than one thinks, has such different ideas that they're just incompatible with the existing atmosphere and instruction and faculty at an institution.

EB: Yeah, but it happened with MacAgy, and he certainly employed a brand new faculty.

PJK: There was no such thing as tenure.

EB: No, no tenure. That was one of the things about the school that made it possible for it to come to life overnight, dramatically. And MacAgy, as I say, employed a whole new faculty practically, and the very few people left over from the previous administration, so Ernest Mundt did what was more or less typical then. Gurdon Woods came along and again, did the same kind of thing, mass firing, mass hiring. So that's been the story pretty much.

PJK: So you came in with one administration and went out with another one and came back in with Gurdon Woods. And you say largely as a result, you feel, of the exhibition in '56 -

EB: Well, I was never told that. I just imagined that helped.

PJK: Did you know Gurdon Woods before?

EB: No.

PJK: Now, who else in your group was hired at that time?

EB: Well, the people that were there, a fellow named Ralph Putzker, Roger Barr, I didn't know their work too well, and I didn't know them at all. There were a number of others, I can't remember the names of the other people.



... I was the first of the new group that was brought in. It wasn't long after I was there they brought in Frank Lobdell and Jack Jefferson, Jerry Hato@sky, Jim Weeks, Diebenkorn.

PJK: Many of whom had been students then, during your first stint at the California School of Fine Arts?

EB: Right.

PJK: You were chairman of the graduate department there from '56 to --

EB: Well, that was the job I was brought down to do, to teach and to be chairman of the graduate department program.

PJK: I see. What about those years? Is there anything that stands out? Incidentally, I'm curious -- when you were teaching over there, were you living in San Francisco or did you commute?

EB: Well, no, I was living in San Francisco until '59. I was living in the Montgomery block. Coming down from Marysville, I lived in Berkeley a year, and then moved over to San Francisco.

PJK: What about those years, your second session at the Art Institute?

EB: Well, it was different than the first session. I mentioned in the first period there under MacAgy when I arrived, the school struck me as absolutely fantastic, just a fantastic place and very much alive and kicking and didn't change appreciably the whole time I was there. I was trying to point that out in our previous talk about this, that it wasn't a graveyard until Clyfford Still appeared (laughs). At the school when I came back to it in '56, then it was primarily a job of reforming the school. Woods had been there, I think about a year before I arrived, so that it was just in the beginning stages of being reformed under his regime, and a lot of the people under Ernest Mundt then were let go or shunted off into night classes, and then all of these new people were brought in. So this was a different kind of a situation. It became then something I thought was marvelously exciting, in the process of this transformation under Gurdon Woods, it became a marvelously exciting place.

PJK: Once again.

EB: Yeah.

PJK: Why was that?

EB: Of course, you taught younger students, not the G.I.s who were there in great numbers in the first instance. These students then under Gurdon were typically college age students, but there were some very good ones nevertheless.



EB: Well, were some of your favorite students or those who felt at the time had the most promise and perhaps realized that promise. Or in some cases maybe haven't.

EB: Well, certainly Joan Brown would be way up there on the list.

PJK: What was she like as a student? I've interviewed her.

EB: Well, not very different than she is at present (laughs), an adult right now, very enthusiastic, very positive, very energetic, very imaginative person. Obviously a joy to have as a student, a joy to work with.

PJK: She came, if I remember correctly, with virtually no training.

EB: Yes.

PJK: Very, very little background if any, and I gather it wasn't much of a handicap.

EB: Well, she has a lot of just innate talent. Talented person.

PJK: Quick learner.

EB: Yes.

PJK: Who else?

EB: Bill Brown. He was her first husband. I'm not thinking of William Theo Brown, another Bill Brown.

PJK: Well, this is a Bill Brown that exhibited in the first 1957 exhibition, isn't that right?

EB: I think so.

PJK: I mean, it wasn't William T. Brown, it was another.

EB: Um. And Manuel Neri, I certainly remember him as being an outstanding student. And then of course there was William Wiley and Bob Hudson and Bill Geis -- these came a little bit later on. Oh and many, many more great students. Bill Allan, yes. Deborah Remington, and David Simpson, Wally Hedrick and one or two others. They'd come up from Pasadena to join us and Hayward King.

PJK: How do you account for this? It's very interesting because in a way, there may be more names that are familiar to me, at least, I don't know if this is generally true, from the second period under Gurdon Woods at the Art Institute than the perhaps more famous days when Clyfford Still was there. Looking back, do you feel maybe that's true? It seems like the students, certainly, were an interesting group.

EB: Yeah, I don't know how to explain that.



: What attracted them? What happened? It was like the super star period was --

EB: You're suggesting there's a higher mortality rate among the students in the first case?

PJK: Maybe, I don't know. But do you see what I mean? What was the special appeal then, this new appeal, at the San Francisco Art Institute? Obviously word had gotten around something exciting was happening.

EB: Right. Word had gotten around. I think their teachers at other institutions had become aware of this, they suggested, "Gee, go here, go to this place, something great happening, you'd profit from that environment, that faculty," and so forth. But a lot of this kind of thing goes on. I know I do that if I think there's a great place for a student to go, I push it, recommend it.

PJK: Because Wiley and Allan and these people came all the way down from Washington.

EB: Well, it's because of the urging of their instructor up there. I forget where it was. Washington or was is Oregon?

PJK: Washington.

EB: Sure, that's how it happens.

PJK: Bill Wiley's certainly a student of that generation, the times when you were the head of the graduate school, as a matter of fact, who perhaps has achieved the greatest international reputation. Do you remember him as a student? I mean, did he distinguish himself?

EB: Oh, yes, a real hot shot. Oh, yes, he was. There were others that were hot shots, too, but he was the most outstanding. There was no mistaking that there was something very special in his abilities. And one of these people that're very, very quick on the uptake. He'd be dealing with a new thing practically overnight but it would look as though he had some considerable experience with it. Very, very quick talent.

PJK: Another quick learner.

EB: Yes.

PJK: Are you able to identify, thinking back to those days, some special quality that might describe the situation there? Because certainly something did develop out of those years. And one aspect of it eventually came to be called "funk," perhaps, although that's not a very popular term, but maybe it'll serve the purpose.

EB: Yes.





PJK: Was there a sense of some real change, perhaps in esthetics and ideas, and that this was focused at the Art Institute?

EB: A change?

PJK: Well, a shift certainly from the 1945-50 days, the MacAgy years or Ernest Mundt period, a sense that something special was happening, because this was the beginning of the move into the so-called "beatnik" period, the beat generation, and it was something of a homogenous group, at least from where I sit, with certain shared ideas, these students that you listed. You know, many of them fit pretty well together.

EB: Well, yes, there was a bit more diversity than the MacAgy period. I don't know just how to put this. There was a bigger range of attitudes, I would say. It's like the situation that exists today (but not quite to the extent that it exists today) where you go into an art class in an art department or art school, and you see everything under the sun going on, everything going on concurrently. Well, it wasn't as extreme as that in the Woods period, but it was headed more in that direction than, say, what existed at the school under MacAgy. I think the overall attitudes under MacAgy and the whole spirit of the school was, while it was very, very spirited, more solemn, more serious. There was that aspect that existed during the Woods period, but it was intermixed with all sorts of other things. Then you mention "funk." Well, funk is really in the spirit of having (laughs) conspicuous fun and poking somebody in the ribs and getting a kick out of doing something that was brash and slapstick. And maybe not burying that aspect, not having that as a subordinate but making that predominant, that's the major issue.

PJK: I'm just curious how that came about because it seems to me that the dish was really cooked and served up out of the San Francisco Art Institute, and because most of the people, most of the young artists have come to be associated or at one time were associated with funk sensibility, whatever that may be, are counted among the students at that institution at the time. And one wonders just how this came about, if it was visible at the time? Sort of almost neo-dada approach.

EB: It would seem, though, that the only way you could explain how that comes about is by searching way out beyond this locale. I don't mean to say that this was happening in every part of the country all at the same time, but I think the attitude was trying to suggest that there was this increase in diversity of viewpoints, a kind of relative fracturing is taking place, starting back in that period as opposed to the MacAgy era at the school. The fact that there could be a very solemn student working right along side a student who was a big cutup. And, too, them tolerating one another and seeing themselves as just part of the art world, that's not a thing that's gone on, you know, for



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a great length of time. It's a fairly recent phenomenon. Whether it will continue or not, I have no idea.

PJK: Maybe I'm asking a broader question than that which has more to do with the Bay Area, although I suppose if not the heart, the important focus of the art world in the Bay Area has been the Art Institute. But about that time, maybe a little afterwards as it matured, something that came to be called "funk," a certain sensibility, a certain attitude, came to be identified with the Bay Area. Perhaps more than it should have been. Perhaps earlier, everybody thought of Bay Area figurative for a while, that it was California art or at least Northern California art. Then later on it came to be funk. And you say this was happening, certainly some of these attitudes were being encountered elsewhere in other parts of the country. But nevertheless, no other part of the country that I can think of became characterized, almost exclusively for a while, by this one sensibility, this one expression, the manifestation.

EB: You mean funk?

PJK: Yeah.

EB: Really?

PJK: I hate to use the word, but we have to use some word.

EB: You think that was the note that was being struck?

PJK: Well, it was very much associated with the Bay Area, yeah. As a matter of fact, if you look at a number of the artists ranging from, say Gilhooly and Arneson and those working with ceramics and pottery, to Bruce Conner who came here, of course, or Wally Hedrick, one of the progenitors of this special kind of irreverent expression, aspects of Wiley are not unrelated to it. Joan Brown even can be brought in with certain pieces, although I don't think it characterizes her. You see what I mean? Or do you think maybe this is an artificial kind of classification that really doesn't hold?

EB: Well, I think that the other influences would -- of course you mention the figurative influence, but I think the Frank Lobdell influence, now that's not funk at all, it's very, very serious and harkens back to the kind of devotion and almost religious period of the earlier days, the MacAgy era and certainly it reflects very strongly the influence of Clyfford Still. And I look upon this as being very strong, very vigorous, very potent note in this scene that existed there at the Art Institute. It has nothing to do with funk. Now, I think Wiley was influenced by Lobdell, Bill Geis and his sculpture. Now you can say they're funk aspects to Bill Geis. I would say that's the secondary note; it's not the primary note. I don't even think that funk is a major note in Bill Wiley's work. Joan Brown took a fur coat out of the garbage can and made a ~~rack~~ out of it (laughs) one time. Now that was really funk art.



PJK: That's very funky.

EB: That's very, very funky. But her work isn't funky.

PJK: No.

EB: Not really funky in the way that fur <sup>not</sup> ~~rack~~ was. That was unadulterated, flat out funky. Did you ever see that ~~rack?~~ (laughs)  
<sup>not?</sup>

PJK: Yeah. Doesn't she have it at her house?

EB: Well, I think she sold it some years ago. I thought the University Art Museum bought it, I'm not sure. But at any rate, you're right in saying there's this funk element. I would put it sort of along side of a whole bunch of other elements and fantasy. Sometimes a personal fantasy enters into it. Sometimes it's been -- I'm thinking now just of another phase of Bay Area work. It started out in the years we were talking about, in the Gurdon Woods years, and has become one of the prevailing directions, one of the prevailing modes. Sometimes it's called personal surrealism, subjective surrealism.

PJK: Which artists would you mention, just as illustrations?

EB: Stieglmeyer, I don't know the names too well. Bruce Conner actually might come just as well in that category as in the funk, I think more likely in that category than in the funk. I think of funk as having less humor in it.

PJK: Well, everybody seems to understand funk differently, that's one of the problems. It needs a clearer definition. Nevertheless, whatever funk may be, that particular phenomenon did attract a great deal of attention, it did focus attention on this area. Perhaps it wasn't really representative as you suggest, or at least it wasn't the whole picture. But that leads me to something else: How would you characterize, if you had to, the Bay Area art world in terms of perhaps an indigenous sensibility, expression? Is there something that you would associate with this area that's unusual?

EB: You mean for all periods, not just one period?

PJK: Yeah, something that cuts across it, perhaps.

EB: I don't think I could single out, you know, a set of characteristics that I would say hold true for all time in the Bay Area.

PJK: Well, not for all time, perhaps.

EB: I think that it's true that there's been for a considerable time, a high degree of productivity in the Bay Area. I think that's one of the things I like about it, the Bay Area, a center where people produce art and there's a lot of enthusiasm that exists, a lot of concern. I think we were



talking about this before. This seems to be complete free from the commercial aspects, it's not based on a big market, it's not based on the collectors, there're no great collections in the Bay Area, there's no great money going into art in the Bay Area. Nevertheless, there's been this zeal, there's been this high-keyed activity in art as long as I can remember.

PJK: Okay. How do you explain that?

EB: I don't know. It's a very tough one to explain.

PJK: Well, put into personal terms, you've obviously made a decision to remain in this area and I think a part of it had to do with various teaching jobs and so forth, but you must have, at some point, considered there might be advantages to, say, moving to New York. This must have suggested itself to you, a closer association with a gallery although Staempfli was representing you -- I don't know, when did you go with him?

EB: It was '59.

PJK: Yeah. So at least you had that outlet. But didn't it ever occur to you that perhaps as an artist you might be able to...

EB: Well, no. I think that I have always felt so conscious of the physical environment, of drawing on that, of being kind of wedded to it, I guess, in a way, that when I've been elsewhere, I've felt a bit like a fish out of water. I'm sure if I stayed elsewhere long enough I would have gotten over this. But I'm very attached to this area, it means a lot to me and I think the fact that it has always, going back to my early days, memories of scenes and the constant quality of streets I walked since I was a little kid.

PJK: But that's the attraction of the location, of this particular area and --

EB: I'm lucky that this happens to be a place where all this art goes on. It's not as though you're in some cultural desert some place, you're in a very lively place. Part of it could be the big cluster of institutions in which art is taught that exist in the Bay Area, part of it could be that.

PJK: But part of the aspect of the common wisdom for years around here, I gather, has been you make certain professional sacrifices by choosing to stay in the Bay Area. At least, I've heard this from others that one has a feeling that you're giving something up.

EB: If you stay in the Bay Area?

PJK: Yeah, that it isn't really where it happens.





EB: Who says that?

PJK: It doesn't matter (laughs). I assure you somebody says it. That somehow the New York art world has been a more serious art world and maybe tougher, but that's where one has, say, more opportunities through contact with galleries or whatever, to make it.

EB: You're talking about commercially? The commercial aspect?

PJK: Yes, exactly. And some people even feel perhaps that the excitement of New York, the constant discussions of ideas, the more intellectual and philosophical orientation --

EB: Well, that would be more important. The museums. The museums are marvelous, they're very educational themselves.

PJK: But this, I gather, you weighed these things in the balance a long time ago, I gather --

EB: Yes. Yeah, I think you have to really determine as best you can what's best for your own nature and your own makeup. I've never felt a kind of a dearth of stimuli. Now that could be because I'm very slow. We were talking about a person like Bill Wiley who's amazingly quick; I think Diebenkorn's very, very quick in his ability to grasp, to understand and make sense of a particular set of things. I'm very, very slow, and so that a situation like this which every New Yorker will say is very slow paced, is just right for me. And I think New York is paced a little too fast and I'm sure I would miss all sorts of treasures because they'd go by so fast. Right?

PJK: I don't know. (laughs)

EB: An environment like this gives a lot of time to mull things over, I think, and there's nobody hasseling you, there's nobody breathing down your neck. I like the idea of having a dealer that's 3,000 miles away.

PJK: Are you still associated with Staempfli, is that right?

EB: Well, yeah, but he's not too interested in this work I'm doing now, the non-representational work, and so I think we're gradually, through the ages, drifting apart.

PJK: Let me ask you another question --

EB: I think he sent me a Christmas card, it was crazy.

PJK: Speaking of Staempfli, I gather that he was the dealer who first was attracted or became interested in Bay Area figurative, or at least the first New York dealer.

EB: Yes.



PJK: And I guess played an important role in what was national interest in this phenomenon.

EB: Yes.

PJK: How did that come about? Do you remember?

EB: Well, he just came out here with his check book in his hand. Like I said, it was the first time I'd ever encountered anything like that, and he wrote out a check. He bought up things like crazy, he bought up ten paintings like that for a particular sum of money and then signed you up to become a member of his stable. He did this with David Park, I guess later on with Joan Brown, made some overtures to Bill Wiley, I've forgotten who else.

PJK: But how did he discover you?

EB: I don't know. I don't know how that happened. I had gotten a Ford Foundation grant just before he came out. This was given some publicity, and it could have been that.

PJK: Because it seems he was very much attracted to Bay Area figurative painting --

EB: Right.

PJK: -- that he recognized it as a movement --

EB: Yes.

PJK: -- and tried to contact, tried to establish a relation with some of the artists involved. Did you get the feeling that he was really excited about this as a new development?

EB: Yes, oh, very much so.

PJK: Did you feel that he really understood what was happening? As it, in a sense he was something of a kindred spirit?

EB: Well, yes, he certainly responded in a way which made you feel was with his very whole heart. It was by no means a dollars and cents response, it was personal, it was passionate, and very excited kind of response. The work that he lived with in his apartment back in New York, the work that you would see hanging on the walls and the sculptures you'd see sitting on the coffee table, was a very, very different order. It was not at all like my work or David Park's work or Joan Brown's work, but nevertheless, there was this side of him that was very susceptible to figurative painting.

PJK: Well, he certainly does seem to be one of the New York dealers who bothered to come to California, or at least to the Bay Area -- I don't know if he went elsewhere in the state -- with the idea of locating and showing artists out here. And I don't think at that time there were too many



EB: No, there weren't.

PJK: Well, before Staempfli, you had had a few exhibitions. Any in commercial galleries?

EB: Well, let me see. There was the Kantor Gallery --

PJK: In '55 in Los Angeles. Did you sell anything from that showing?

EB: No.

PJK: And then I'm sure nothing was sold from a one man exhibition in '53 from King Ubu Gallery.

EB: No.

PJK: So prior to 1960 and George Staempfli, you had only two exhibitions in commercial galleries?

EB: Yeah, I guess that's right. That would be about it.

PJK: So you really hadn't sold any paintings at these two galleries.

EB: No.

PJK: I imagine you'd sold things out of your studio?

EB: Yeah, but very little.

PJK: So you really had supported yourself almost 100% by teaching.

EB: Oh, yes.

PJK: Where did that change, then?

EB: Well, I'm still supporting myself by teaching. (Laughs)

PJK: Well, yes, but not that it's reversed but --

EB: I've augmented that teaching salary with a few sales.

PJK: Let's put it this way: When did you start to make enough sales to make some difference? Was it with Staempfli?

EB: Some difference in the sense of what?

PJK: Well, where it was worth noting, that you felt that you were painting with the idea that there were those who would buy, some collectors.

EB: Well, it never made a difference in that way. It made a difference in income tax, that's where it made a difference. And eventually, I had to get somebody else to make my income tax out. If I understand you correctly, you're saying



that there would be a change in the studio, a change in the feeling of the act of painting that now these things are being sold and that enhances the value of painting. Is that what you're suggesting?

PJK: Well, I'm not sure. That could be one ramification. But there came a point, I would expect, when you saw that your pictures were actually selling, or there was a possibility that they were going to sell, which wasn't the case for a number of years, at least to any extent. I don't know what kind of difference this makes to an artist in the way he or she views the work and the act of creating it. That's a little more profound question, I suppose. But I suppose all I was really trying to do was pin down the time when you felt you were starting, really, to get some attention and --

EB: Actually, the Ford grant was the thing, that was the very first instance where I was kind of surprised by the work getting this much attention and the work getting this kind of evaluation and so forth. That was brought about by national competition, this Ford grant. It was a rather elaborate scheme they had worked up which started with competition within regions and spread out until it took in the whole United States. So I was rather pleased with the fact that my work had made it through all those obstacles and I ended up getting this very generous \$10,000 grant of money. That was really the first time having anything like that kind of experience. Now, does that answer your question?

PJK: I think so. I guess I'm trying to a certain extent, to establish Staempfli's role -- if it was such a role -- in bringing Elmer Bischoff to a more prominent station.

EB: Oh, well what he did was to get paintings into the New York Museum of Modern Art, for example, and the Whitney. He did a lot of that kind of thing, so Rockefeller bought paintings and so forth. He was very good in that way, a live wire.

PJK: You, for the most part, were presented, I gather, with David Park and Richard Diebenkorn and others, again in connection with the Bay Area figurative school. Certainly Staempfli exhibited you in that context several times. Do you feel that the two things went together: the greater attention to Elmer Bischoff, but also increasing national interest in Bay Area figurative painting? And how do you feel about that? Was it just a fact of history, the way it happened?

EB: Yeah. What you're saying is when you're part of a movement and also you're an individual, and you'd rather have the fact of your individuality take the precedence over the fact that you're a member of this club or this group. I think that's very true, yeah.





PJK: I mean, afterall it was something --

EB: But as you say, you have to sort of accept it as a fact of life.

PJK: Because there was, I suppose, a movement, although I kind of doubt that you who were involved, made much of that fact. I mean, did you feel that you were a member of a club and so forth, or did you feel this was kind of imposed from outside?

EB: Well, no, I thought it was imposed from the outside. It was a simplification that was a matter of convenience for journalists and for historians and for middlemen. It happens over and over again. Isn't that true?

PJK: Well, I think so. What do you think of Paul Mills's original grouping way back in '57, which was early on in the game? Several different artists, I believe, were included in that show. And if you glance through the catalogue, you're more struck, I think, by the differences in some respects, than the similarities. Nobody, I would think, would say that there was any close-knit group, stylistically, tagged together or committed to the same stylistic notions.

EB: No.

PJK: I mean, David Park, you, Diebenkorn, and a number of other artists, some of who are associated, or have been, with Bay Area figurative. I guess Jim Weeks would fit into that, Paul Wonner. I gather some of these people, some of them I'd never heard of -- Robert Qualters for instance, Bruce McGaw, Robert Downs, you know they're really just a few from that year.

EB: Qualters and McGaw and Downs were students at the Art Institute, mainly influenced by Diebenkorn more than anybody else. This would be true of Bruce McGaw, certainly. Well, I mean if you're really trying to see this as something new and something different, and you see it in the context of what was going on at that time and what was the predominant thing, the predominant "isms" that existed at that time, which were not figurative, then you could make this into a brand new direction and lump all these people together. I think, looking back on it now that there's been a span of time, you see that figurative painting from a distance takes on a different complexion, and you wouldn't say it's kind of arbitrary picking out of those particular people, lumping them all together under this one banner.

PJK: Do you feel that Paul Mills then was fairly astute in recognizing, and so early on describing, this phenomenon? I guess what I'm asking you is how do you feel about that show and the way Paul Mills selected and then wrote about it?



EB: Well, I suppose I just assumed that he was genuinely caught up with this look which was given the name "figurative painting," and saw it had great potential. I'm sure there must have been that element in it, too, that he felt that it was something that was probably going to catch on and be a great moment historically, maybe not just locally, you see.

PJK: But you must have had some sense of really participating in history, or at least that there was the possibility that you were making history?

EB: Well, not to the degree that I guess Paul Mills felt. I think that the feeling within your own studio, you're making history, is just as tenable an idea, you know, I don't know. You've asked that, I can see this is something in your mind because you've asked that in other connections, for example at the school under Gurdon Woods, was there an awareness that this was something special and something unique and so forth. Well, not in the way a journalist would see it as special and unique, not the way an historian would see it as something special and unique, not the way a person who's working on his PhD and using this as a thesis subject would see it as special and unique. I think that when I'm doing something that really makes a connection in my own feeling, I see that as special and unique, but not in the same way. I see it as having tremendous potential, but not in the same way. It's as though if I were to do it in the same way, I'd have to go out and make a study of what has a big potential today. Does that make any sense?

PJK: I think so. I think I'm probably asking more or less a difficult question to go back and then try to determine degree of historical self-consciousness.

EB: Well, right, you see, it's very much like say, Staempfli comes out here and when he invests in this figurative painting, when he invites figurative painters to exhibit, to become part of the stable, and to exhibit in his gallery in New York, how much of that is a shrewdness about something that has a great future historically. And God knows what importance it has -- how much is he even concerned about that and how much is he just caught up with the falling in love with this "ism"?

PJK: It's got to be both if he's an art dealer, he's in business and he has to do a little bit of both.

EB: Well, but then you would say, "What does a painter, while he is getting ecstatic about what's happening in his painting, does he also have his mind on 'Oh, wow, this is going to sell like crazy' or 'Is somebody else going to love this and buy this for a big, fat sum?' and 'Think of all the fun I'll have carrying all that money to the bank.'" Is he thinking about all those things?



PJK: Oh, no, painters are special, you see. (Laughter) I have a romantic notion that they don't care about those things such as money.

EB: You see, I think that the situation really changes. I often think of this as though you are involved with something, you're caught up with something, you even forget about the time, you forget about looking at your watch, it's just that absorbing to you. Somebody looks over your shoulder, snatches this thing away from you, and says, "This is worth a thousand dollars." Then later on, somebody comes along and says, "When Paul was all absorbed, he knew that was worth a thousand dollars. Now don't kid me, he knew that, that's why he was so absorbed -- Baloney." And you won't be able to wiggle out of this. They will insist that you must be like what you're saying all the dealers must be, you know, they know they're going to make a million dollars so it's partly the love of the thing, it's partly the love of that buck that the thing's going to bring.

PJK: I would think most dealers are that way, we won't say all of them.

EB: Well, I don't know. In Staempfli's case, I don't know. I just assume because of the way he had responded in the studio, the way he responded in the presence of my work while he was in the studio and back there at the gallery convinced me that he really liked this. He was really knocked out by it.

PJK: But that's okay because the assumption is then that this is quality and he should be able to sell it.

EB: No, it's not necessarily quality, it's just that he likes it.

PJK: Well, I know, but if anybody respects one's own taste, then you assume they go together -- you like it and it has quality. But that opens up a...

EB: Well, yeah. (Laughs) It gets very complex because the minute you say that, it takes me back to the time when we had the studio visits, when our peers -- now these are artists, and I'm thinking of people like David Park or even Frank Lobdell -- would come around and look at the work at the studio. Then I would say this, if they like it, this is quality. I'd never say this about a dealer. Never think of it. I think, "They like it." I don't say it's quality. But if a fellow artist whose work I know thoroughly and respect thoroughly says something is good when he comes in the studio, this, to me, is quality then. I say, "I've done something of quality." It never entered my mind to treat anything in the words of a dealer's as indicating quality. I'm not trying to suggest that the dealer has no taste, I'm not trying to suggest that if a dealer says something is good that it automatically is going to be questionable. I'm just saying that I've never





thought of this as being a clear indication of anything more than that person's preferences.

PJK: Right. But that person, I would assume, would think that because he liked the work, it has quality. The two go together. Otherwise, you would have to call into question his own taste.

EB: Oh, sure.

PJK: So that's all I was saying. It seems to me that about that time, about 1959, when you got the Ford grant, 1960, first one-man show in New York, from that time on -- perhaps with some breaks -- you really started to get quite a bit more exposure and move around. It sort of marks another stage of your career. Would you say that that's true?

EB: Yes. When was it when the jazz and poetry readings in North Beach first got attention?

PJK: Well, that was the late fifties.

EB: Late fifties. So that a kind of national awareness -- through Look magazine, maybe, through Life magazine -- that there's something going on here in this area, started to dawn about that time. The first instance of it was the jazz and poetry stuff in North Beach.

PJK: So do you think this affected your fortunes at all?

EB: Well, no, but I think it's part of a same kind of movement, so to speak.

PJK: I see. What I'm asking is, do you feel that because attention became focused on jazz and poetry readings and so forth, that then there was a looking around, a closer look at other aspects of the arts than in a way would have been?

EB: That's right, that's right. I think there was that, certainly.

PJK: You even went off as visiting critic to Yale in, I believe in 1961?

EB: Well, yes, that was after the summer at Skowhegan.

PJK: Why was it a visiting critic? Or is this more in --

EB: No, that's just a term. It was to talk with students and to look at their work and discuss their work.

PJK: It's more like artist in residence or something?





EB: Yeah, but it was only two days. It was at the tale end of the summer session that I spent at Skowhegan.

PJK: But at any rate, it seems that from that time on, you were included in many more shows, in group shows and in one-man shows, so your career was on an entirely new footing and had pretty much remained that way. A few years later, you for some reason, switched from the San Francisco Art Institute across the Bay to the faculty of the University of California. How did that come about?

EB: Well, I was just invited to come over there and join the faculty. They made me an offer I couldn't resist. I couldn't refuse, I think is the way it goes.

PJK: And that was in 1963. You've been on the faculty ever since?

EB: Yes.

PJK: And so really the lion's share of your teaching career -- well, I don't know if it quite works out to that -- has been at the University of California.

EB: '63 to the present, 14 years. I guess I was 13 years all together at the Art Institute. So, yeah. That's true.

PJK: You've taught a good number of years. You've been a regular --

EB: I've taught all my life.

PJK: Yeah. -- regular teacher, regular fellow, regular teacher. I know for a fact that you have some very definite ideas about teaching and education and so forth. What about differences you've found, not as a student but as a teacher, between the University of California students and the Art Institute? The students themselves and perhaps the program as those two relate.

EB: Well, I think one of the major differences is the environment. When you go into the Art Institute, it's all art and you're aware of this the minute you look inside the door. The availability, the ease with which you can see painting and sculpture, and actually see this going on, the accessibility of the classrooms and all that, makes a big difference at the Art Institute. The situation at the University is not ideal in terms of the physical setup. We share the building with anthropology. Aside from a few glass cases down on the main floor that have exhibits of class work rather indifferently selected for the most part and very often displayed not much better than a Boy Scout display (laughs), aside from that, you wouldn't know there's any art that goes on in the building until when you get up on the second floor and third floor where you find classrooms. There's a degree of isolation and a degree of a kind of inappropriate setting, I would say, for art at the university.



I remember reading once in some recommendation by the Ford Foundation committee that art departments in universities be located off campus. And that makes sense, in a way. I don't think the campus is a very compatible environment for art. I guess in every university, there's a consciousness of the primacy of science. Science is the most respected of all the disciplines, and most of the disciplines attempt to pattern themselves after science. The more scientific they become, the more prestigious they become. And that doesn't strike me as the most compatible environment for art. As opposed to that, then the art school is free from that kind of pressure, free from that sort of a climate, and better off for it, I believe.

PJK: Do you feel that there is any benefit to the art student of being in the university setting where there, theoretically, is exposure to an intellectual environment, intellectual stimulation, of people involved in research and learning in all different areas, exposure let's say, to art historians who, again theoretically, should share some common interests? They don't always do that. This is something the university's uniquely qualified to provide whereas California School of Fine Arts, Art Institute, is very specialized and limited. Do you feel that this is -- you mentioned some disadvantages in a university setting, but is that balanced?

EB: Well, I've argued with some university people about this. They say that people at the Art Institute are barbarians (laughs).

PJK: Well, are they?

EB: Hardly out of the trees. And we at the University of California educate ours so they're bound to produce more profound work.

PJK: I gather by your laughter you don't think there's a connection.

EB: I think it's a simplistic notion. We talked about this before.

PJK: Yes, at lunch. The idea of ideas, perhaps the desirability of ideas to an artist.

EB: Well, I suppose to a parent, to parents whose child is very average, I would suggest they go to the university if they're interested in art. But if their child is very special, I would suggest they send him to an art school. Art schools have compromised -- unfortunately -- so much to degrees and all of this kind of thing to attract more students and so parents would send their children to the art school, and they're getting more than just art. They're getting a more rounded education and they'll get a teaching degree or something like that.



PJK: So the art school isn't what it used to be by any means.

EB: But the university, as you're pointing out, it does have its virtues, it does offer a tremendous amount in the way of resources and the intellectual stimuli that you're speaking of, certainly there is that aspect of things. The university, I think, has been a little embarrassed, though, on the other hand, by the fact that it's drawn so much of its faculty from the Art Institute. And it's the Art Institute which has produced the people, by and large, who've gotten the best jobs and have the biggest names and so forth. So somehow these barbarians are able to pull off a thing or two for the record.

PJK: I was just going to ask you, you found it very easy to list names of students at the Art Institute who accomplished, who distinguished themselves, and indeed, their names are familiar to me and others. I gather it would be much more difficult for you to create a similar list from your experience at the University of California? I'm not sure what that means.

EB: Well, most of the people of course, like Diebenkorn was there for a year, a semester, something like that, although he finished up at Stanford. I think Sam Francis was there, and Mark DiSuvero, was it, I'm not sure.

PJK: Fred Martin was there, wasn't he?

EB: Yes.

PJK: Jay de Feo.

EB: Right, yes.

PJK: But basically, well, I leave it up to you. I pose the question does that hold up? Do you find that it's a little more difficult to create as long a list of distinguished graduates? And why?

EB: I would have to do some research on it. I don't know, somehow it seems if a person went to the Art Institute, they went to the Art Institute. If they go to Cal, they could have been another major and then taken a few courses, then finished up some place else, and so on. It's a little bit harder. That's why I said I'd have to do some research to make sure who is who.

PJK: Well, I suppose it's no great surprise that universities don't necessarily produce the greatest artists because that doesn't go together, it's a different type of thing. I suppose what I'm probing for, interested in, is the value of the university to, and the acknowledged opportunities, to a young artist.





EB: Well, it's hard to say. See, you do have the demise of art schools, which is a factor. How much of this weighs into the balance is hard to say. You've got people arguing most artists are not produced by art departments, and isn't this going to affect the art? Speaking in those terms, it would seem that as you have an increase in art that makes use of science, makes use of computers, and possibly an art which is cerebral, possibly an art where you have students that have talents in the sciences becoming artists, moving into the realm of art, that as this increases -- if it is to increase -- the university art departments are in a better and better position to cater to the art, to the art student. But then you would say, "Well, what's influencing what? How do you know the university isn't actually encouraging a more cerebral and instrument oriented type of art which it can really deal with?" So that the art department and the art curriculum as it stands now, is outmoded for a number of art students. They would much rather have a great deal more mobility between art and science courses, for example, or certainly between science facilities and art department facilities. Sometimes they have to go to great trouble to try to get access, say, to scientific instruments and so forth, great trouble doing what they would like to have just as part of the setup. Or the setup for their convenience. Now you see, here's where an art school doesn't begin to have the money to provide these facilities. And furthermore, as I said, it's not a very encouraging environment to start with, for this kind of wedding of art and science or art and computers and the conceptual way, intellectualized way of working.

PJK: You yourself, I know, are interested in and conversant with art history. Not all artists are, especially not all art students are. I was wondering how important you feel that is. Is this something you encourage students to become involved with?

EB: Well, yes. Yeah, I think that it's exceedingly important for the individual's own nourishment, the development of his own potential 'cause I like to think of the artist as not only free to, but sort of obliged to form his own tradition right in his own lifetime, to have his own tradition in the sense that he is drawing from far and wide and he can be influenced by Sumerian art as well as he can be influenced by the latest thing in the magazines, that he spans that whole gamut. So without an awareness of art history, it seems to be cutting yourself off from a tremendous source of nourishment.

PJK: What interests me, talking with artists, is that so many of them -- and in some cases contemporary artists who would be considered fairly avant-garde in what they're doing, certainly not traditional -- have as their heroes, the artists they most admire, historical figures. Many of the same names come up again and again. Of course, it's very reassuring. Rembrandt is one of them.





EB: Now this is in interviewing artists you find this?

PJK: Yeah, just in talking with them. I don't want to draw any generalization now, but it seems that they can be very comfortable and very at home with Velazquez or Rembrandt, maybe Titian, I don't know. But old masters. And I mean really old masters. Appreciate these artists, admire them, and yet, their work has -- it seems to me -- almost nothing to do specifically with the artist.

EB: You don't see the connection in the work is what you're saying?

PJK: Generally not. So they're looking to these artists for other reasons, and they keep citing them, and you don't hear as often reference to contemporary figures or even modern masters, Picasso -- well maybe -- early 20th century figures to a certain extent. But more often, they go back. I find this interesting, and this also, I think, ties in with the importance of familiarity with the tradition, the art tradition which the young artist inherits whether he or she likes it or not. And yet, so many of them seem to be, I think, woefully ignorant in that area. Goya is a figure that often comes up, much, much admired, I think, by many artists. And let me carry it one step further -- in talking with some of the artists that come out of the Art Institute, and some are very accomplished artists, I'm surprised at how little they know about art history. On one occasion I talked with an exception to that rule, also out of the Art Institute who does know historical figures. And he made the remark that in the Bay Area, many of the artists are quite ignorant in this respect, especially Art Institute products. Now what comes of that, how you're supposed to respond to that statement, I don't know. It's just an observation.

EB: Yeah. If you see the awareness of art history in a formal sense, I can see where there'd be a lot to complain about. But I don't think that's necessarily the right way to see it. I think the things that an artist picks up on his own outside of the scheme, that you don't know just what time in his development he's going to pick up on such and such, you don't know just exactly when he's going to find out about these things on his own. Self-training kind of thing. It puts a whole different picture on it. Take, for example, the business of learning how to draw, say learning how to draw representationally. I can't say that I really learned how to draw until I started to draw during the Railway Express days. I think a person could have said, "Well, that person doesn't know how to draw." And after I did some of that, people say, "That guy knows how to draw." (Laughs) But the self-educated, I think perhaps takes place to a greater extent in the art. I'm sure it's for the poet, too, and for the musician, also, for the composer. It does not exist for the engineer, it doesn't exist for the doctor. The doctor does have to, during the course of his formal education, learn particular things. He can't learn these



things on his own later on, he has to accomplish this and show that he's accomplished this before he can operate. Right?

PJK: I would hope so. If he's going to operate on me, anyway.

EB: And it'd be true of the lawyer, too. But I think that this is another situation where our training in the university scheme of things is not quite at home, you see, where it's living in a bit of a foreign world.

PJK: Let's move on to something else. I'm struck, in looking through for instance, the catalogue for your Oakland show which was in '75, Oakland Museum or for that matter seeing the show -- which I did -- a certain quality of romanticism in your work. And a special quality, I found anyway, of mystery in the images, in the scenes. Now, I'm wondering if you feel that you are participating in a broader sense in this romantic tradition, but specifically in terms of that element or line that has run through American painting, and I guess may be best represented by an artist like Albert Pinkham Ryder. Do you feel any affinities there?

EB: I like his work very much and admire his work, but he's such a different kind of a person than I am. He's more of a visionary artist, which I'm not. Meaning by that it seems like what he does arises out of a very quirky kind of condition, very quirky nature. It comes naturally.

PJK: I, of course, don't mean to say that your paintings look like Ryder's paintings, although actually looking through I see some motifs that are rather shared. I mean, they're out of the romantic heritage. For instance, the seascape of '67 is an image much loved by Ryder -- but then a lot of other artists as well. And I realize you're probably seeking other things. But nevertheless, what strikes me in much of your work, first of all is the tremendous interest in color. I remember seeing the Oakland show, the Figure with Tree from 1972 reminded me very much of Titian.

EB: Yes.

PJK: And I think actually at that time I asked you about that, and you were sort of surprised, "What's this quack talking about?" But in the paint or the quality, and the color to a certain extent, and then I think the picture I recall in this connection is the Bacchus figure in the Titian in the National Gallery in London. I think I have that right. But anyway, there's a particular composition I had in mind.

EB: Well, I'm very keen about Titian, the late Titian, the last 15 years of his life.

PJK: When it begins to dissolve a little bit.



EB: Well yes, but it's still very substantial.

PJK: Yes. What some people describe as Titian moving into his pre-impressionist. But what about Titian? I know I keep trying to pin you down, but you say you're keen about him?

EB: Oh, yes. Everything about him. It would be hard to describe. In 1966, my wife and I went through a number of countries in Europe and spent a great deal of time going to the museums -- did I mention this before? I guess I did. There was in Munich, in the Pinakothek, this very, very late Titian Christ Crowned with Thorns, a large painting. He had done a version of this about 20 or 30 years earlier which is in the Louvre in Paris, a very small painting. And this one in Munich, I thought was absolutely tremendous, the greatest painting I'd ever seen in my life, or ever hoped to see. And then a painting that was later still, actually not completed by Titian, completed by a long-time student or disciple of his, Palma Vecchio, this painting is a Pieta in the Accademia in Venice, and this I thought was as good as the Christ Crowned with Thorns, and again a painting that just knocked my head off. Two of the strongest experiences I've had. But both of these, you see, very late in his...

PJK: That's interesting. But I'm not surprised to hear that.

EB: From looking at my work?

PJK: Yes. It's one of the things that struck me right off. Another thing that strikes me, maybe way off the mark, talking again about our American tradition of realism, one I suppose could even make certain observations about Bay Area Figurative in connection with the American tradition of realism. But I'm thinking of Hopper particularly, some of the New York scene painters, but particularly Hopper because of a quality of loneliness, an isolation, maybe timelessness about his scenes. I feel that in connection with some of your paintings and some of the Bay Area figurative work. Not necessarily that this was the intention or subject --

EB: No, it comes about because I had too much trouble trying to get more than one figure to work. (laughs)

PJK: I'm thinking especially, I suppose of the generalized figures in interiors, where the figures don't seem to relate in really a psychological sense. Now, one didn't have to read that in terms of --

EB: You mean where there're two figures, they don't relate?

PJK: Yes. These two, for instance. I suppose what I'm asking is do you feel that comparison means anything to you? How do you feel about that?





EB: Well, I can't answer because it was not my intention to make the figures look lonely. I would want them to relate, but they'd just come out that way. If you see them that way, that's the way they are. Out of communication. There is a painting I did where the man is sitting in a chair facing out of the painting, facing the viewer, and the woman is in the background looking in another direction. Well, obviously in this case there's no attempt to get these two people looking like they're talking and looking like they're having an exchange of any kind. But then, most of the time, the figures are in a position where they could be acknowledging each other's presence, at least.

PJK: So you really don't feel there's any connection, any special affinity between your work and the work of Hopper?

EB: No.

PJK: You never were especially attracted to his?

EB: No, I was never especially attracted to Hopper's paintings. I've never examined them or studied them. I've looked at them but I've never been drawn to examine or study or to dwell with them to any great extent. But I think that Hopper was just as interested in, we'll say, the room in which the figure exists and the light coming into the room, and in that sense, he's a little bit like Vermeer. I think that this is true of Vermeer, too, he's really painting a situation where the figure is part of that situation, and whether it's an exterior or interior. And I have felt the same way in my paintings, again getting back to this idea of maybe a painting in the course of development, transforming from an interior to an exterior, becoming just a landscape -- this can arise if the quality or the character that begins to generate itself in the earth or the sky, begins to really captivate one so it becomes just as compelling in the process of painting as the figure. And the figure can then be removed. I've seen that Hopper's paintings are very much like this, that he's painting that world, he's really painting that condition, he's painting the light, he's painting the mood of the day or of the time of day. And I certainly share that with him, but not quite in the way you present this.

PJK: I have one last question, or at least one last topic I'd like to discuss with you. It certainly requires discussion. We've been spending a lot of time talking about the figurative work, and in 1972, I guess, you switched again, and began painting large scale abstractions. So all of a sudden you retreat from the figure --

EB: Advance. (laughs)

PJK: -- and I gather also, well I don't know if you changed your medium at this point, or rather changed from oil to acrylic --





EB: Right.

PJK: -- at that point. Can you tell me how that came about? What occasioned this?

EB: Well, dissatisfaction with the way things were going with the figurative work. I suppose that kind of negative thing I mentioned would have to accompany any big transformation, any big change. Part of it is a rebellion, part of it is moving away from and a reaction against what had existed. The painting had slowed down too much for me. It also was too much a matter of pulling teeth, it was too much of a one-way operation. I function best when there is a response going on between myself and the canvas as though the canvas is alive and it's another person making all sorts of suggestions, saying yes to this and no to that, all this kind of thing. Well, the painting had stopped doing that for some reason or other. I guess that would be a kind of a description of when things blew cold, and would seem as though too much of the time is a matter of putting things into the canvas from the outside and having them do nothing and suggest nothing and the whole canvas falls mute. It was rebellion against that. I can't really explain it any better than just saying that. I don't know why that happened.

PJK: Seems there're two alternatives available, either non-objective or representational, and that when one doesn't answer one's needs, one of these alternatives, it's a move to the other.

EB: Yes.

PJK: That becomes exhausted and it's a move back again.

EB: Well, we hope that doesn't go on too much, back and forth.

PJK: But it would suggest -- and this would seem to validate it to a certain extent what David Park is quoted as saying, Paul Mills quoting Park, that there really is very little difference between non-objective and figurative painting.

EB: Well, there's a lot of difference, though, if you put it as you're putting it. You've got this --

PJK: Well, if your concerns are changing rapidly, but if they're just different arenas in which to work out essential, fundamental concerns of painting, if you follow me?

EB: Well, they're more different, I think, than blondes and brunettes. I think they're more different than that.

PJK: Certainly your recent abstractions, I haven't seen very much of your early non-objective work, so I really shouldn't pretend as if I have, but I imagine there's quite a difference? In other words, you haven't returned to the 1945 depictions?



EB: Oh, no, no. There is a difference. A real different attitude. These are painted with a good deal more consciousness, I would say, and a good deal more conscious discipline than my earlier abstractions were. Here, where there seems like anything goes, endless possibilities, you can put anything in or make it any size, and in the course of the painting turn it upside down and keep on working. Any way is up until you finally decide and write on the back of the canvas "Up." (laughs) But up to that point, it could be almost any... So there is, you know, endless variability, but the introduction of a kind of a discipline, the introduction of saying you're going to allow this and not that, allow these occurrences to exist in this way but not in that way, then it becomes something that is not dictated from the outside but purely inner dictation. Say in figurative painting, unless you get into a Marc Chagall kind of world where goats can be up in the air playing violins, you do have to have a ground plane and things do have to fit on that ground plane. There're all these laws of nature, there's gravity to insure that things are not going to be floating around in the air unless they're made to do so, like airplanes and so forth. And in figurative painting, you're constantly dealing with, and you're constantly aware of that sort of thing. Sometimes the fact that you do have a horizon and a sky above that and earth below that, can be very oppressive. It repeats, it insists that it has to be this way. One way you can get away from that is by dissolving the horizon by a heavy vapor, you know. (laughs) That's good for only so long. So people say here there're not those restrictions, this doesn't have to be sky, this doesn't have to be earth, these things don't have to sit in a particular kind of relationship, and so forth. So that then what you permit and what you don't permit becomes an inner decision. It's not dictated, the material's not dictated by the subject or theme.

PJK: But still, you remark that your recent abstractions involve a great deal more control and perhaps calculation than the abstract expressionist work.

EB: A lot more censoring. In the act of painting, there's as much spontaneity, as much intuitive working, but then there's a stepping back and the decisions, the results, and the cancelling of this and the changing of that.

PJK: You know, there's an interesting parallel again, if you'll excuse me, between your development and progress here, and that of Richard Diebenkorn, it seems to me. Not to say that your work looks the same or anything like that, but he of course, after an initial abstract expressionist phase, then moved to the figure, as did you, and I'm not sure exactly when, began the -- I suppose with the Ocean Park series -- a return to a non-objective painting, but a much more controlled, in this case almost geometric form.



And there seems to be some parallel then between the way he's moved ahead and you've moved ahead. I'm not suggesting there's influence back and forth.

EB: There could be the same kind of response in ways that I described my response. A certain point you reach a road block. But as I mentioned, the idea of painting, pulling off a painting and realizing having a painting emerge that you can really stand behind, really feel good about, being more important than whether or not there's a figure in it --



## APPENDICES

- A. Positions, Honors and Awards, Solo Exhibitions, Selected Group Exhibitions, Public Collections.
- B. "Figurative Expression and Abstract Concern," by Robert M. Frash, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California; and "Walking a Tightrope," by Jan Butterfield, for catalogue Elmer Bischoff, 1947-1985.
- C. "Elmer Bischoff: Against the Grain," by Marcia E. Vetrocq, Art in America, October 1986.
- D. An interview by Chiori Santiago, Metier, Winter 1985.
- E. "Kaffee Klatsch," by Harriet Swift, Oakland Tribune, February 24, 1991.
- F. "Recollections of John A. Bischoff, Jr.," an interview with Elmer Bischoff's brother recorded by Andrea Gabriel, from The Rockridge News, April 11, 1987.





# J O H N   B E R G G R U E N   G A L L E R Y

228 GRANT AVENUE • SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94108 • TEL 415 781 4629 • FAX 415 781 0126

## ELMER BISCHOFF

Born: Berkeley, CA, 1916

### Education:

University of California, Berkeley, MA

University of California, Berkeley, BA

### Positions:

1965-85    Professor, University of California, Berkeley  
1963-65    Associate Professor, University of California,  
            Berkeley  
1956-63    Instructor and Chairman of Graduate Program, San  
            Francisco Art Institute  
1953-56    Instructor, Yuba College, Marysville, CA  
1946-52    Instructor, California School of Fine Arts, San  
            Francisco

### Honor and Awards:

1973        Election of National Academy of Design  
1967        Election to Board of Governors, Skowhegan School  
            of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME  
1966-67    Appointment to Institute for Creative Arts,  
            University of California  
1964        Art Institute of Chicago, Norman Wait Harris  
            Bronze Medal and Prize  
1963        National Institution of Arts and Letters Grant  
1959        Ford Foundation Grant  
1957        Oakland Art Museum Purchase Prize

### Solo Exhibitions:

1989        John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
1988        John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
1986-85    "Elmer Bischoff, 1947-85," a retrospective,  
            San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Laguna  
            Beach Museum of Art, Laguna Beach, CA; The  
            Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Greenville  
            (S.C.) County Museum of Art; Hirschl and Adler  
            Modern, New York, NY  
1983        John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
1982        "Matrix 55: Elmer Bischoff," University Art  
            Museum, Berkeley, CA  
1980        "Elmer Bischoff, Recent Paintings," The Arts Club  
            of Chicago  
1979        John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
            San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA





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- 1975 San Francisco Art Institute, CA  
University Art Museum, University of California,  
Berkeley  
Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA  
Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
Art Academy of Cincinnati, OH  
1974 Boston University Art Gallery (with Richard  
Diebenkorn), MA  
1971 San Francisco Museum of Art, CA  
1969 Staempfli Gallery, New York  
Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA  
1968 Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle  
1964 E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA  
Staempfli Gallery, New York, NY  
1962 Staempfli Gallery, New York, NY  
1961 M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, CA  
1960 Staempfli Gallery, New York, NY  
1956 San Francisco Art Association Gallery, CA  
1955 Paul Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
1953 King Ubu Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
1947 California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San  
Francisco, CA

Selected Group Exhibition:

- 1989 "Artists of the California Landscape,"  
Natsoulas/Novdoso Gallery, Davis, CA  
1988 "Elmer Bischoff, Sidney Gordin, Erle Loran;  
Drawings," Gallery Paule Anglim  
"Peter Selz Select's Show," Berkeley Arts Festival  
1984 "The Figurative Mode: Bay Area Painting 1956-66,"  
Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York  
University, New York; New Harbor Art Museum,  
Newport Beach; traveling exhibition  
"Twentieth Century Drawings: The Figure in  
Context," International Exhibition Foundation,  
Washington, D.C.  
1981 "California: State of Landscape 1872-1981,"  
Newport Art Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art,  
CA  
"Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American  
Paintings: 1940-1960," Rutgers University Art  
Gallery, New Brunswick, NJ; Montgomery Museum of  
Fine Art, Montgomery, AL; The Art Gallery,  
University of Maryland, College Park, MD  
1980 "The Human Force," Corcoran Gallery of Art,  
Washington, D.C.  
"The Figurative Tradition," Whitney museum of  
American Art, New York, NY



- 1979-78 "American Painting of the 1970's," The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; touring exhibition
- 1978 "Bay Area Painters," touring exhibit organized by the Western Association of Art Museums, Oakland, CA  
"Art Faculty Resources Exhibition," Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley
- 1977 "The Modern Era: Bay Area Update," touring exhibition organized by the Quay Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
"California Figurative Painters," Tortue Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1976 "20 Bay Area Painters," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA  
"Paintings and Sculptures in California: The Modern Era," Touring exhibit organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, TX  
"Drawing Invitational," Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, CA
- 1975 "California Landscape," Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA  
"Art Faculty Show," Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, CA  
"Staempfli in LA," Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
"Hansen-Fuller Pays Tribute to the San Francisco Art Institute," Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1974 Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois
- 1973 "Drawing Invitational," San Francisco Art Institute, CA  
"Drawing from Life and Studio Set-ups," Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA  
"Now Drawings," Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
"The MacAgy Years 1945-1950," Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA  
"A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land," Sheldon Art Gallery, University of Nebraska  
"Art on Paper 1973," Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
- 1972 "California Works on Paper: 1950-1971," University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA  
Galerie Smith Andersen, Palo Alto, CA  
New York Studio School, New York, New York  
(benefit)
- 1971 "Drawings, USA 1971," Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul, MN
- 1970 "Expo'70," Osaka, Japan





- "American Painting 1970," Virginia Museum,  
Richmond, VA  
"Looking West 1970," Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE  
"Faculty Show," University Art Museum, Berkeley,  
CA  
"Second National Invitational Exhibition of  
Drawings," University of Wisconsin, Green Bay,  
Wisconsin
- 1969 "American Drawings of the Sixties," New School Art  
Center, New York  
"Art on Paper," Skowhegan School of Painting and  
Sculpture exhibition at Lee Nordness Gallery, New  
York
- 1968 "Figurative Four," Bernharz Gallery, Los Angeles,  
CA  
"Selection of Paintings from James A. Michener  
Foundation Collection," Brooks Memorial Art  
Gallery, Memphis, TN  
"An American Collection (Neuberger Collection),"  
Rhode Island School of Design, Brown University,  
and Smithsonian Institute  
"1961-Growth-1965," San Francisco Museum of Art,  
CA  
"On Looking Back: Bay Area 1945-1962," Bolles  
Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
"Skowhegan School Fourth Annual Exhibition and  
Sale," Nation Academy of Design, New York  
"Humanist Tradition in Contemporary American  
Painting," New School Art Center, New York, NY
- 1967 "Faculty Show," University of California,  
Berkeley, CA  
"International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting  
and Sculpture," Pittsburg, PA  
Annual Exhibition and Sale, Lenox Hill Hospital  
and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture,  
New York
- 1966 "American Art Masters," Collector's Gallery,  
Miami, Florida  
"American Painting, 1966," Virginia Museum of Fine  
Arts, Richmond Virginia  
"Drawing Exhibition," for Benefit of the  
Foundation of Contemporary Performance Arts, New  
York  
"Contemporary Urban Visions," New School Art  
Center, New York  
"Seventh Annual Exhibition of Drawings,"  
California State College, Long Beach, CA  
"1966 Midyear Exhibition," Butler Institute of  
American Art, Youngstown, OH  
University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, TX  
Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles, CA





- 1965 "Drawing Exhibition," Laguna Beach Art Association  
Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA  
"The Faculty, University of California Art  
Department," Hollis Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
University of California Art Gallery, Berkeley, CA  
"Contemporary Studies of the Nude," Davis Gallery,  
New York  
University of Illinois, Urbana, IL  
"Pittsburg International," Pittsburg, PA  
"29th Biennial Exhibition," Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, D.C.  
"Three California Painters," Staempfli Gallery,  
New York, NY  
"Selections from the Work of California Artists,"  
San Antonio Art League, Witte Memorial Museum,  
San Antonio, TX  
"Annual Art Exhibition and Sale, Lenox Hospital  
and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture,"  
New York, NY  
"American Exhibition of American Painting,"  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1964 Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
"Art Gallery '64," Hall of Education, World's  
Fair, New York, NY  
"'54-'64,: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade,"  
Tate Gallery, London  
"Seven California Painters," Staempfli Gallery,  
New York  
"Between the Fairs: 25 Years of American Art 1936-  
64," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
"The Friends Collect," Loan exhibition of recent  
acquisitions by Friends of the Whitney Museum, New  
York  
"Contemporary Bay Area Painting and Sculpture,"  
Stanford Art Museum, Stanford University, CA  
"Second Biennial of American Art," Cordoba,  
Argentina  
"Four California Painters," The Obelisk Gallery,  
New York, NY  
"A Decade of New Talent," American Federation of  
the Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1963 "28th Biennial Exhibition," Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, D.C.  
National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York,  
NY  
"Landscapes in Recent American Painting," The Art  
Center, New School for Social Research, New York,  
NY  
Salt Lake City Art Center, Salt Lake City, Utah



Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, California  
Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco,

CA  
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- 1962 "Art of the Landscape, Gallery, New York, NY  
"Art: USA," Touring exhibition of the Johnson and  
Son, Inc. collection  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
Stanford University Art Gallery, Stanford, CA  
"Fifty California Artists," touring exhibition  
organised by the San Francisco Museum of Art and  
the Los Angeles County of Art  
"The Artist's Environment: The West Coast,"  
Touring exhibition presented by Amon Carter Museum  
of Western Art (Fort Worth)  
"Ford Foundation Grant Winners' Exhibition,"  
Silvermine Guild of Artists, CT  
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
- 1961 "Faculty Exhibition," San Francisco Art Institute  
"Painting from the Pacific," Auckland City Art  
Gallery, New Zealand
- 1960 Denver Art Museum  
"Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Park," Staempfli Gallery,  
New York  
Bolles Gallery, San Francisco  
"9th Annual Mid-Year Show," Butler Institute of  
American Art, Youngstown, OH  
"Winter Invitational," California Palace of the  
Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
"Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture,"  
University of Illinois
- 1958 American Federation of the Arts touring exhibition  
"Biennial," University of Illinois, Chicago  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
"New Directions in Painting," Florida State  
University
- 1957 Oakland Museum  
"Art: USA," New York, NY  
Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, Minneapolis, MN  
San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1956 San Francisco Museum of Art  
Richmond Art Museum, Richmond, CA
- 1955 Richmond Art Museum, Richmond, CA
- 1952 San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1951 San Francisco Museum of Art  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- 1948 San Francisco Museum of Art  
Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA
- 1947 San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1946 San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1944 San Francisco Museum of Art



1942            San Francisco Museum of Art

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Public Collections:

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NtY  
Art Institute of Chicago, IL  
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.  
Honolulu Academy of Arts, HI  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
Museum of Art, New York, NY  
National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.  
Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, Purchase, NY  
New School, New York, NY  
The Oakland Museum, CA  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA  
University of Kansas Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS  
University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, WI  
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina,  
Greensboro, NC  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
Yale University Art Gallery, CT



# **Elmer Bischoff**

## **1947–1985**

*Robert M. Frash*

Laguna Art Museum  
Laguna Beach, California

This exhibition was funded in part  
by a grant from the National Endowment  
for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal  
agency.





# Figurative Expression and Abstract Concern

California, the nation's third-largest state is also its longest, providing a diversity of climate, life-style and aesthetics. Yet, it is nature that controls this mini-civilization, with weather both mild and scorching, and tectonic characteristics that can be idyllic and destructive.

Major catastrophes are taken in stride, and looked upon not with resignation but with understanding, and perhaps, a sense of pride and triumph. The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was both disaster and lesson. While most of the city lay in ruin, one 35 room house stood intact. It had lost merely 19 bricks from two of its chimneys, and inside, the enormous drawers containing folded table-linens had not been disturbed. Today, that house is still standing, occupied, and in handsome condition.<sup>1</sup>

The California sun, in a benign mood slows the movement of people, while it speeds the growth of all living things in gardens. Yet, trees falling on houses are not uncommon in heavy storms, as air and water act to change the landscape.

The Pacific Ocean lies to California's west, a source of undisputed power, pleasure, and terror. Coastal communities are often shrouded in fog at dawn, yet are cooled by the ocean's moist breezes. The ocean changes the coastline gradually (through tidal action), and suddenly as its aspect changes from bright, clear blue to dark, brooding grey, as evidenced in a winter storm.

These distinctions of nature in California are unique. So, too, is the perception of its landscape. One hill, for example, can be seen as blue, green, brown, black, or even red, depending on merely one aspect of nature — light.

It was into this environment that Elmer Bischoff was born in Berkeley in 1916, ten years after the San Francisco earthquake, and into the midst of World War I. His childhood was infused with an interest in music, shared by all family members. Other artistic interests do not seem to have received much attention. Rather, Bischoff's introduction to the visual arts took the form of "cartooning" which he refers to as a form of relaxation, along with baseball.

Bischoff entered the University of California in 1934 with art as his major. All of the instructors were themselves artists and the instruction under influential teachers such as Erle Loran and Margaret Peterson focused on pictorial structure and composition rather than representational concern. The curriculum followed the traditional order of first drawing, then light and dark and then color.

While the influence of Giotto was well entrenched, Margaret Peterson guided the receptive student's attention into quite a different direction. Her enthusiasm for Picasso's work was boundless and formidable. Bischoff was receptive to this new aesthetic experience and acknowledged his attachment to Picasso's work. He says, "The big still lifes that Picasso painted in the 20's . . . For a time my paintings were homages to Picasso. Picasso represented to me the maximum of aliveness on canvas."<sup>2</sup>

Bischoff received his M.A. in 1939 and took a teaching position at the Sacramento High School until going into service (Intelligence Section) with the Eighth Air Force in England in 1942.

He returned to San Francisco in 1945 and in early 1946 accepted a position as instructor under Douglas MacAgy at the California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco. He held the position until 1952.

Bischoff's reaction to the vigorous free-wheeling independent structure of this school can be aptly described in a passage from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which he identifies perception as the faculty of seeing — "that is to say of feeling a profound astonishment."<sup>3</sup>



Rigidity and certain historical doctrines were virtually absent from the school's curriculum. It reflected, rather, the quality of an informal and engaging forum in its varied individual concepts of personal freedom in painting. Solutions to the problems involving line, form, structure and paint were infinite and imaginative. There was no evidence of a formalist atmosphere. Opinion and comment between instructors and students were without constraint. "It was a community of peers without the usual hierarchy." Abstract Expressionism was an unquestioned dominant in the school's structure.

Specific representation and image were no longer dominants in painting. The Abstract Expressionist movement was *new*. And at first, to give serious consideration to its position was considered something of an affront. Realistically though contemporarily new, its tenets and objectives were very much in place.

Meyer Schapiro comments on its emergence and position in Contemporary art:

"... the painters who freed themselves from the necessity of representation discovered wholly new fields of form-construction and expression, ... came to believe ... that every work of art has an individual order or coherence, a quality of unity and necessity in its structure regardless of the kind of forms used; and, that the forms and colors chosen have decided expressive physiognomy, that they speak to us as a feeling-charged whole, through the intrinsic power of colors and lines..."<sup>5</sup>

Abstract Expressionism was at once both an aesthetic siren song and a challenge. Bischoff says:

"The forms that emerged on the canvas were looked upon as a sign language, a kind of Esperanto that could be read by anyone."

The attitudes toward this mode were critically suspicious of Cubism (especially Picasso and Braque) and inclined with a casualness more toward the self-impulsion of Kandinsky and the structuralist position of Mondrian. Bischoff's feeling for Picasso, however, remained undiminished.

In contrast, Abstract Expressionism was felt by many to exemplify "gestures of freedom." While exuberance and enthusiasm for this manner of painting were evident in countless canvases, acceptance was hesitant and indecisive. For it was something so new as to be almost frightening.

In a review of works by Bischoff, David Park and Hassel Smith at the SFMA in 1948, Erle Loran wrote that

"it was the most complete release from restraints of all kinds that had ever occurred."

Museum goers were caught unaware at the paintings' new, idiomatic language; the familiar concept of the recognizable image seemed to have disappeared. Certain large areas *suggested* form but did not necessarily specifically define it. Areas appeared to float suspended and unsupported while the paint itself conveyed a ferocious application.

Earlier cubist influences were not entirely absent, of course, but as Bischoff has said, "Cubism can be 'plotted out'". It does not require nearly that degree of trust of your immediate responses. Calculation is an element of Cubist painting." Abstract Expressionism was, regionally, new and "immediacy" was one of its many identifiable working features.

One painting in the exhibition exemplifies Bischoff's early Abstract Expressionist involvement: *Untitled*, 1948 (fig. 1). It reflects the spontaneity of the new non-objective direction. Its large areas have quickly received attention and these spaces (and the colors that fill them) are both final and secure. Major "line" is absent. As a humorous addendum, its slight central image — possibly a small figure — is one that might well



have been tacitously added by Miró himself.

The "siren song" of the school's abstractionist commitment did not go unacknowledged. Its effect on Bischoff was evident but slowly its attraction lessened. He resigned his position as instructor in 1952 and joined the faculty of Yuba College, Marysville, California, as an instructor a year and a half later. His time away from the California School of Fine Arts was short-lived, however, for he returned there in 1956 under the directorship of Gurdon Woods. He was appointed Chairman of the Graduate Department, a position he held until 1963.

The move toward representational painting began in 1952 and Bischoff's comments on the change are not profuse. He has commented on the change:

"the thing (Abstract Expressionism) was playing itself dry. There was a definite cooling off... When I was in the real grip of Abstract Expressionism, the marks and gestures had a hyper existence. But it was your own passion that inflamed those things, and there was just a gradual loss of this passion."<sup>10</sup>

The new representational direction did not, in any manner, diminish his feeling for the Abstract Expressionist character to which he, at first, gave enthusiastic attention. Indeed, certain elements of the earlier movement are evident in paintings throughout the 60's. The distinctive structures and forms evident in paintings of both periods would seem to indicate a disparate divergence in his original intentions. This however, would be an erroneous assumption. While the academics of form, structure, color and paint reflect dissimilar evidence of the Abstract Expressionist and Figurative periods, a *singular*, private aesthetic principle guided both the initial concepts and later direction of the works of both periods.

Bischoff comments

"Ideally, one would wish to do away with the tangible facts of things seen — of people, houses, paint on canvas, the rectangle of canvas — and deal directly with the matter of feeling. One dreams of moving free of the shapeliness of shapes and the colorfulness of colors..."<sup>11</sup>

And again, more directly, to the critic, Thomas Albright:

"A 'unity of feeling' is the principal end. What you present in a painting is something that is immediate. If it makes a total impact, people are not going to pull it apart for anecdotal references. They're going to be hit — engulfed — to experience this world of the painting. What is most desired in the final outcome is a condition of form which dissolves all tangible facts into intangibles of feeling."<sup>12</sup>

The change in 1952 to the Figurative Period was an acknowledgement of a representational thesis that embraced his energetic attraction to regional landscape and his committed approach to and involvement with "the figure"

"I never did figurative painting where the personages were identified or repeated. Figurative painting was not regional. [I] wanted to take on some of the "universality" that was left to be the realm of the abstract expressionist's work... to create a world and to create people in that world who were more timeless, were not fixed in time, were not dated in time."<sup>12</sup>

That the change did not take a pronounced classical direction was not unexpected. Soon, critical opinion was not hesitant in suggesting a profusion of "earlier influences" and "parallels". Included were such artists as Giotto, Sargent, Bonnard, Toulouse-



Lautrec, Munch, Ryder, Balthus, Hopper and rather distinctly, Cezanne. Although he readily acknowledged the influence of Picasso, Munch and Giotto, Bischoff's comments on the subject are reticent and curt. The implied position, however, of some of those suggested was tenuous. Not surprisingly, Hopper. Concerning his work, Bischoff says "I respect his paintings but was never especially attracted to them."<sup>14</sup>

Certain tenets of the Abstract Expressionist mode could not be entirely ignored. Bischoff had immersed himself in its abandonment of recognizable form, its intensity, and the limitless variations given to form, structure and line. Gradually, priorital attentions to these lessened.

The volatility of paint, however, excepted it from figurative inattention. It can be dripped, thrown, swirled, layered and even sculpted. It may obliterate, underscore, veil or suggest. It is an important element in shaping a painting's "finish." As an ingredient, it may accentuate or limit an aesthetic intention.

The manner and supportive purpose underscoring the use of paint in Bischoff's representational phase caused questionable and critical comment. G.R. Swenson says:

"Elmer Bischoff's (Staempfli) use of thick, heavily brushed paint is ostentatious and self-glorifying — the mis-application of a technique which interests itself with paint to a subject-matter (landscapes, nudes) which demands *that paint quality be used for its resemblance to the subject-matter* (of which Courbet is the master), if paint quality be noticeable at all. This is separate from the question of style as the natural outcome of personal idiosyncrasies . . ."<sup>15</sup>

Hilton Kramer, in a detailed and perceptive article on the Figurative painting of the Bay Area School, discusses the continued employment of certain earlier Abstract Expressionist dicta. Among these are the various methods of paint application for which he holds little patience. In Bischoff's landscapes, however, the relationship between paint and subject matter is not incompatible. The initial intentions are controlled and quickly realized. The basic aesthetic is both sound and credible. Mr. Kramer takes note:

"Where one feels the native, existential element in Bischoff's work . . . is in the delineation of the West Coast landscape itself. In Bischoff's work it remains an unrealized subject but the only one in which one senses the presence of a deeply felt experience."<sup>16</sup>

And where structural elements are included — houses perhaps— the total pictorial equation remains unchanged:

"It is precisely the kind of pictorial definition one finds here, in which the cubic density of buildings and the open space behind them are both clearly given without subterfuge or ambiguity. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

When, however, the figurative image was an element in a work, the independent, regional methods for handling paint became another matter. A certain concern and unfavorable comment surfaced, questioning the apparent reluctance to abandon certain established painterly patterns of the Abstract Expressionist period. And Bischoff's work did not escape the critic's attention.

"Bischoff's figures tend to trivialize and diminish his landscape vision; one is left with an acute sense of the disparity which exists between the feeling lavished on the empty landscape space and the tenuously realized figures, which seem to have been arrived at by some purely external necessity."<sup>17</sup>





Mr. Kramer's general assessment of the situation reflects his distinct displeasure:

"I think there is a reason for this disparity, and it goes to the heart of the matter of this entire approach to figurative painting at the present moment. In painting a wide-open landscape space, these painters are under no obligation to choose between the fast brush of the Abstract Expressionist method and their subject matter. So long as they confine themselves to landscape space, they can have it both ways..."<sup>18</sup>

All critical opinion did not take this direction. While Bischoff's uses of earlier methods of paint application may have been critically censured, they are legitimate as an element in a figurative work's initial concept.

Dore Ashton's assessment illustrates this judgment:

"... he places a figure in a landscape. But he carries over the long, broad stroke of previous abstractions — the squiggles, curlicues and loose brushwork. The technique by its very nature is designed to suggest flux, a soft drifting continuum. And that is just what happens. Everything about the landscape and the figure is soft. A tree melts liquidly into the liquid sky. The figure blends with the rocks. There is no hardness in the terrain and no contrasting fleshliness in the human body."<sup>19</sup>

One of Bischoff's intentions was to convey a certain condition of feeling that was personal, private, and not often shared. And so it is no surprise that no work of his involves people — groups. Nor does he ever imply intense activities or energies. Even in the interior paintings, background and accessory provide only a structural responsibility. The valid and acknowledged supports for his figures are the landscape, the sea and the clouds.

Each of these supports reflected its own particular quality of light. Bischoff was well aware of these distinctions and made use of their diversified qualities when "translating" light into color.

Mastal M.L. D'Otrange comments on the resultant variants:

"Here is no pastel prettiness, but all the violence and vibrancy of this golden land: the raw sienna of the fertile earth, the lush blue-green of exuberant vegetation, the shameless indigo and cobalt of an almost invariably radiant sky — unless there sweeps across it the swift anger of sulphur-hued tempest clouds."<sup>20</sup>

*Woman with Head on Hand* (fig. 2) — certainly a timeless triumph — is intimately reflective in character and *Woman Dressing* (fig. 3) evokes a similar feeling although its isolative element is less strong. The colors in these works are rich and moodish. They support a quality of permanence, and the distant quality of the dark backgrounds force the images forward.

The selection of colors and their countless variations in the figurative paintings seem almost instinctive. They imply the intended evocation of certain moods as in *Country Room* (fig. 4) and *Orange Sweater* (fig. 5). Fury is suggested by their direct and primary character in *Breakers* (fig. 6). And in *Girl with Mirror* (fig. 7) their Fauve-like directness conveys the harshness that is a quality common to reflection.

With the works that employ more than one figurative image, a change in color values is evident. Figures continue to reflect the solitary element of the single images but to a lesser degree. There is a new "finish" in these paintings and one senses something of the "moment" that is common to a photograph. These works are quiet in character but not withdrawn. In both *Two Figures with Vermillion Light* (fig. 8) and *The White Flower* (fig. 9) a relaxed gentleness is evident. Their colors, muted and low keyed, are



equally unassuming. And the varied whites, happily, are just where they should be.

Implied silences are common in Bischoff's figurative work and any suggested evidences of communication are rare as well. *Bedroom* (fig. 10) is an exception in that it reflects little, if any, of either. There is a casualness about its elemental structure that marks it as informal and domestic in character with its white bowl, unmade bed and a conversation that, I am certain has, for the moment, just finished. The warmth and variants of its color contribute to the scene and its informality is further underscored by brushwork that is appropriate and joyous.

Drawings and sketches often provided figurative subject matter that found its way, with certain mandatory adjustments, onto canvas. Bischoff did not paint directly from a model. However, his fascination with the figure was furthered through sketching sessions with Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and other friends.

Major attention was given to the model whose positions were a far cry from earlier classical and formal postures. The sessions were informal and casual amid certain accessories which prompted Diebenkorn to comment to me, "If you look carefully you'll find identical pieces of furniture in drawings by most of us."

The drawings were not duplicated in Bischoff's paintings. The positions of the models' arms, legs and hands were more severely angled than what one might expect. Yet they reflect an assured elegance and confirm an attribute for the medium.

*Models III* (fig. 11) is classically positioned and executed. The dexterous use of charcoal and black and grey wash give it a finished disparity. *Full Length Nude Profile Seated* (fig. 12) gives forth a similar richness and grace. The figures in *Animals and Baseball* (fig. 13) are humorously imaginative and might be thought of as a light-hearted parody of Hieronymus Bosch — with a baseball and pitcher.

*Models* (fig. 14), a charcoal wash on paper, is an exception. The figures are carried off three sides of the paper with windows continuing off the top margin. The positions of the heads, cast downward and the rather exaggerated positions of the models' legs, arms and hands bring Balthus to mind at once. His oblique suggestion, drive and sullen private preoccupation, however, are lacking in this drawing of Bischoff's whose rendering carries no implied overtones that are elements in Balthus' figurative works. Bischoff's models are recorded with a simple pleasure and their grace is evident. Certain figurative misrepresentation is, interestingly, common to both. Balthus' are remote and withdrawn. While both artists are obviously knowledgeable regarding details of the human figure, pictorial evidence indicates consistently dissimilar interpretations of it. Bischoff disclaims any Balthus influence though he was aware of him as a painter.

Bischoff's figurative painting lasted just short of two decades. In the early '70's he returned to the abstract mode in which he has painted without interruption.

Bischoff comments on the change:

"A revitalization seemed to be in order, . . . In most of my experience as a painter, from 1946 on, the painting has stood, in relation to me, like another person — there's a give and take, a momentum is set up, you propose something and the painting proposes something, like a conversation. But the figurative painting was getting to be too much of a one-way street, like sitting and talking with a person who doesn't say a goddam [sic] word."<sup>21</sup>

and describes his objectives:

"I want the composition to be a total event determined by the will of the individual images. For this, I have found the most helpful state of affairs within the canvas to be one of dynamic interactions bordering on anarchy."<sup>22</sup>

The return to abstraction, however, was one marked by his figurative experience. Although much altered, elements from both earlier periods are apparent in the new



work. The permissive direction of the California School of Fine Arts "where you could start a canvas actually with *areas* of color"<sup>23</sup> and the informal attention to structure and unrecognizable image are again evident, but to a much more direct and assured degree.

The newer work contains a freedom and authority that was not always evident in paintings of the earlier abstract period. The image is no longer specifically defined by excessive "bonding" or "edge" as in *Untitled, 1947* (fig. 15) and *Untitled, 1948* (fig. 1). Support surfaces are lighter in tone and the images find their own positions. These amorphous shapes, though not directly recognizable, may suggest organic forms, common objects or even elements of nature. Their character is straightforward and direct and their unquestioned volition is apparent. They may work together or in isolation. They may remain still or join with other forms. They may position themselves in the foreground of a work or remain as the slightest of shadows. Regardless of their diversity, they are integral components of a complete visual experience.

Variants of both white and color provide background. An initial tone may perhaps be changed in value if the form and image appear to be uncomfortable around it. Then it may be overpainted, veiled, retextured or scraped away altogether. The images dominate.

The early *Untitled* (fig. 16) reflects this casual and rather open feeling. Humorous images come forward from a flat white background. This is in contrast to *No. 43* (fig. 17) with its dark areas at the extreme top, bottom and left edges of the canvas. The shapes are denser and less fragile than in earlier work. They reflect an independent quality that is supported by competitive tonal variations of red.

The tonal gradation from light to dark (from left to right) is a distinction of *No. 62* (fig. 18). The colored images, authoritatively structured, are confident and direct as though asserting their own dominance over a background barely discerned. *No. 72* (fig. 19) recalls something of the landscape and figurative periods in its general, harmonious textures. Color areas are casually rectangular without defined edges and a few stronger-hued shapes quietly assert their contrast.

The most recent work (1985) in the exhibition is *No. 87* (#20). Its images, positioned forward, are specifically defined. Lighter tonal variations are minimal and perspective, suggested through isolated areas of translucent overpainting, is barely discernible. The work reflects dynamic action and reaction; it suggests that its images, with little trouble, found their own positions. Grace Glueck comments on the work in a recent *New York Times* review:

"A particularly beautiful one is the very new 'No. 87,' a work of boldly outlined forms and free areas, in predominant shades of mauve and blue, established by the subtlest brushing. Spiritedly manipulating edge against edge and coaxing color into discourse with color, Bischoff gives joyful orchestration to these surfaces."<sup>24</sup>

It has the directness and "finish" of a very good piece of modern sculpture.

Bischoff's current abstract attention continues a long and creditable career. That he chose to face its many new challenges is not at all surprising. The earlier figurative period went forward with assurance and brought to Bischoff a national reputation. The abstract era continues certain of its aesthetic elements as he continues to investigate and develop this newer period which is of a different definition.

Creatively, writing may be synonymous with painting. And so, as a tribute to Elmer Bischoff, I am using the thoughts of one writer about another. Taken from the text of the Rede Lecture delivered by E.M. Forster in the Senate House, Cambridge, on May 29, 1911, the subject was the work of Virginia Woolf, who had died in March of the same year. He said of her:

"She was full of interests, and their number increased as she grew older, she was curious about life, and she was tough, sensitive but tough."



and later in the lecture:

"She liked receiving sensations — sights, sounds, tastes — passing them through her mind, where they encountered theories and memories . . ."<sup>25</sup>

Elmer Bischoff and Virginia Woolf parallel one another in many ways. Their sense of total commitment have harbored no interference, and their energies have been proven limitless. Automatically, each has absorbed myriads of diverse sensations from everywhere, and then put the best of them to good use. Each has automatically disregarded "materials" and ideas that were not relevant to the moment. And neither has been adverse to striking out a phrase or eradicating an area of paint from a canvas.

I am grateful for permission to use E.M. Forster's professionally faultless phrasing to suggest, albeit second hand, something of the elements that are not only strikingly similar to those of Virginia Woolf, but are vital, important ingredients in Elmer Bischoff's accomplishments. I like to think that they would have enjoyed knowing one another.

Robert M. Frash  
Curator  
Special Exhibitions

<sup>1</sup> The California Historical Society  
2090 Jack Street  
San Francisco, CA

<sup>2</sup> Elmer Bischoff interviewed by Paul J. Karlstrom, August, 1977, p. 3. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, (Within A Budding Grove) London: Chatto & Windus, 1911, p. 301

Bischoff was familiar with Proust's great work. In a letter, January 24, 1976, to Mr. Floyd T. Amsden whose private collection included one of his drawings, Bischoff wrote: "It was through reading Proust, years back, that I came to feel that an artist is doing most when he is projecting his own humanness and doing this with the utmost intimacy, candor and precision. I think this is the surest way to give rise here and there to work that can expand and heighten our perception of what it is to be a human being."

<sup>4</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 27

<sup>5</sup> Schapiro, Meyer, *Modern Art 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York: George Braziller, 1978, p. 215

<sup>6</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 29

<sup>7</sup> Loran, Erle, "San Francisco," *Art News* September 1949, pp. 45, 52-3

<sup>8</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 47

<sup>9</sup> Albright, Thomas, "Elmer Bischoff: Bay Area

Figurative," *Current*, December 1975-January 1986, pp. 34-41, 56-7

<sup>10</sup> Chipp, Herschel B., "Art News from San Francisco," *Art News*, March 1956, p. 55

<sup>11</sup> Albright, p. 40

<sup>12</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 50

<sup>13</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 79

<sup>14</sup> Swenson, G.R., "Reviews and Previews," *Art News*, Summer 1964, p. 15

<sup>15</sup> Kramer, Hilton, "Elmer Bischoff and the San Francisco School of Figuratives," *Arts*, January 1960, pp. 42-5

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>19</sup> Ashton, Dore, "Art: Elmer Bischoff's Paintings at the Staempfli," *New York Times*, January 8, 1960

<sup>20</sup> D'Otrange, Mastal M.L., "News from New York," *Apollo*, March 1982, pp. 66-8

<sup>21</sup> Albright, p. 57

<sup>22</sup> Hopkins, Henry T., "Is the Mainstream Flowing West?" *Art News*, January 1982, p. 75

<sup>23</sup> Elmer Bischoff interview, p. 3

<sup>24</sup> Glueck, Grace, "Elmer Bischoff," *New York Times*, March 22, 1985

<sup>25</sup> Forster, E.M., *Virginia Woolf*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1912, pp. 4, 6





# Walking A Tightrope

"You have to bring off a fusion of your interest both in the subject and in the painting. It's like walking a tightrope. When you are too enamored of nature you can lose touch with the demands of the painting. Conversely, with too little involvement with the subject, the painting can degenerate into a formal exercise. My aim has been to have the paint on the canvas play a double role — one as an alive, sensual thing in itself, and the other conveying a response to the subject. Between the two is this tightrope."

— Elmer Bischoff

**E**lmer Bischoff's evolution is fascinating. He *started* as an abstract painter, during the high period of Abstract Expressionism, then began painting representationally in 1952, and soon became one of the most important of the Bay Area Figurative painters. Now, just as it has become fashionable to paint figuratively again, Bischoff has returned to abstraction, just as intuitively as he had left it behind.

Bischoff's figurative paintings, which rise thickly and richly out of their medium, have always been closer to abstraction than they are to figuration. The "it is" of his paint is undeniably a statement uttered from within the Abstract Expressionists' "arena in which to act."

Looking hard at Bischoff's oeuvre, it is clear that it is not only the specific and the literal with which Bischoff is concerned, but also that the rich mixes of paint which color his canvases are an integral part of his capacity to achieve his particular reality. Seldom does one see the intuitive, instinctual mix of paint on canvas which blends and fuses the dark, briny tones with drifts of pearlescence and passages of scumbled orange, for example, that one sees with Bischoff, or streaks of luminescent fire which pierce the veiled skin of his later paintings. His mixtures, which often confound, seem unrepeatable, yet deliberate, and they approach a kind of alchemy.

"Throughout the figurative and the nonrepresentational work, all the mixing of the paint takes place on the canvas. I want a play between soft, fused edges and sharp, hard edges . . . opaque paint and translucent paint . . . slowly applied paint and rapid brushwork . . . and paint put on with a wet rag, a knife or a hand as well as a brush."

Moving from the Abstract Expressionists' credo (It isn't about anything — It is!), evidenced in his very early abstractions, to the figurative works with their own powerful *raison d'être*, to the abstract works of the last decade, Bischoff has come full circle. The new abstractions are glorious collisions of color and light which fairly whirl and twist with their power. Historically there are echoes here, of early Kandinsky, and of Gorky (for example, of the surety of color and placement of Gorky's "Water of the Flowery Mill").

The newest abstractions, done over the last ten years, fall roughly into two categories: organic and architectural. In most of them, the cubist grid provides the structure — but more often than not it is implicit rather than explicit, and within its parameters the paintings soar. In these paintings circles, coils and triangles float up and around and through the rich matrix of color — whirling, reeling, tumbling, colliding, given voice by a thickened paint so rich that there is meaning in its very presence. These are gloriously spontaneous paintings, but they are also intelligent ones. The monitoring is there — they walk Bischoff's self-defined tightrope. His eye and his intuition are sure and clear and the channels for receptivity to the images are wide open, yet it is the *mind*



which shapes, measures, and balances, scraping portions of the painting down again and again painting and repainting until the desired end is achieved.

There are many layers in these paintings. There is much putting on and scraping off. Most of the images are composites of a series of previous underlying images that have been partially demolished. There is a constant working and reworking until it is right.

In the early 1950s, when Bischoff was painting abstractions in full force, the images were bold and executed with broad swaths of paint and a large brush. The ground was often thick, opaque white, and it provided serious support for the imagery, which seemed from time to time to be virtually figurative.

When Bischoff began painting abstractly again in 1972, after nearly two decades of remarkable Bay Area figurative works, the painting began very differently than the earlier abstractions from the 1950s. In them still was the familiar white ground, yet floating in front of it were rectilinear abstract elements grounded by their own geometry, which shimmered behind a transparent veil. These canvases, which were sometimes bordered along their edges with rainbowed paint, contained kaleidoscopic images which appeared to shift and flash and move about the canvas.

Then, sometime in the 1970s, the patterning of the works broke up, and miniscule bits and pieces of imagery began to float about the canvas, coloring portions of the ground as they passed by.

In the *late* 1970s color began to come back into the canvas in a new way. Deeply colored grounds in rich turquoises, hot pinks and blues now supported the imagery. In these works, the images were no longer contained by the grid, and they began to move and fairly bounce about the canvas. There were other more stabilized works, now whirling about like fireworks, leaving in their wake a shower of colored sparks which flew like Fourth of July nebulae.

In the beginning of the 1980s, as Bischoff continued to work the ground with new color, the images too became more colorful; wiggling and snapping across the canvas, they moved into the paintings from the outside edges, as if the canvas were only a window on another reality which it could not fully contain.

Many of the newest abstractions rely very much on an architectural structure. In these paintings there is a lyrical, rainbowed palette reminiscent of early Kandinsky, which lends great power and grace to the imagery as planes tilt, float and move in front of one another, glowing from within. These are structured, yet chaotic works in which movement plays an important role. At the same time, there are also elements of stasis which provide a grounding. Throughout it all Bischoff skillfully weaves his paint — now thick, now thin; here dense, there opaque — so that the visual voices become a kind of chorus against which the primary drama is played. In other works, it is the organic which takes hold. These paintings are far less structured and more random works which contain little explosions of color and small rivulets of liquid blue or scarlet which ripple across the canvas, catching fire in a sudden green phosphorescence, then burning off suddenly in smoke or ether as they are subsumed by other colors on the canvas.

“In the non-representational works there is a shifting between the organic and the architectural. In the architectural ones there might momentarily appear a grid arrangement along with an overall vertical and horizontal alignment, and in the organic ones a diagonal alignment. Now, you can read the organic works as tending toward the romantic, and the non-organic toward the classical. But regardless, there is a play between the two polarities which produces in me an action and a reaction contributing to the momentum in the studio.”

In these works, uncanny phosphorescences lead both ebullience and light to the paintings causing them to glow from within. These images which they contained are now shaped in brilliant reds, yellows and blues as well as in the familiar iridescences.



They suddenly become thicker, bolder as well, coming much closer to the early abstractions of the 1950s. In many of them the forms were either organic or erratic. Like curious protozoa, they seem to float in and out of the veiled layers of the painting which form its skin. Rolling, floating, they move in a blur, back into a deepened space not possible in their gridded predecessors. These are all new paintings, drawn up from a rich reservoir which is very much the artists own. They are not about the work of others. Bischoff is not drawing from an art historical pantheon, but from his own:

"During my years of figurative painting from 1952 to 1974, a host of masters from the distant and not-so-distant past were in my mind, and Titian, Rembrandt, El Greco, Bonnard, Munch, and Lautree were among those of major interest to me. I spent time looking closely at their work.

Since 1974, I have not been drawn to study any artists as I previously did. Nourishment is gotten from the work of others, but indirectly and less consciously. The territory I am in is rather unfamiliar and everything has to be summoned up from scratch with each new painting looking for guidance only to perhaps the half dozen preceding ones."

"Painters paintings" — these new canvases by Bischoff are among the very best gestural works being done today on either coast. These are paintings to revel in, to become immersed in, to be consumed by. Seldom does a painter approaching his seventieth year find his stride yet again with all of the power, intensity and fervor of a young artist in the flush of his first major work — yet Bischoff has done it. These paintings are as powerful and sure as any he created in the fifties, yet they speak with a different voice. It is almost as if their joy and lyricism have released them, taking them out into the sunlight where the figurative works could only dream of going.

Jan Butterfield  
October, 1985





*Elmer Bischoff: Woman Dressing, 1959, oil on canvas, 83 1/2 by 67 1/4 inches.  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.*

# Elmer Bischoff: Against the Grain

*A traveling retrospective of the almost 40-year career of Elmer Bischoff documents his move from abstraction to figuration and back again. Revealed is an artist of independent spirit who has always avoided both stylistic rigidity and the orthodoxy of the moment.*







No. 72, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 42 by 38 inches.  
Collection the Morgan Flagg Family.

## BY MARCIA E. VETROCK

**T**he Elmer Bischoff retrospective currently touring the United States offers not only its own material richness, but also the opportunity to consider a career in which shifts in subject matter or format occurred around a fixed center of faith in painting's essential worthiness and humanity. For a viewer weary of today's irony and appropriation, there may be a measure of nostalgia in admiring Bischoff's steadfastness, but there is certainly no condescension, for he makes the paint deliver. The shimmering spaciousness and palpable silence of *Orange Sweater* (1955), the familiar domestic solitude of *Woman Dressing* (1959), the ripely sensuous seclusion of *Girl Wading* (1959), all have been seen and felt and captured with assurance and pleasure. There is judicious liberality, but never self-indulgence, in the extra pats and ribbons of paint with which Bischoff enlivens a breeze-tossed branch or anchors a nude's blunt stance. Whether the starting point of a composition was the





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rocky Pacific Coast or two figures lounging on opposing twin beds, the disparate natures of earth, water, sky and flesh are resolved by Bischoff in the single substance of paint.

Bischoff's name is inextricably linked with the story of the Bay Area Figurative "School"—artists like David Park and Richard Diebenkorn who restored imagery to their paintings in the early 1960s just as pure abstraction seemed to be achieving apodictic grace in New York. Park led the way in 1950 with the shockingly and stubbornly prosaic *Kids on Bikes*. Bischoff's figural work began two years later. Yet the defection from New York-style abstraction was neither total nor, in retrospect, surprising. Stylistic orthodoxy has never been a hallmark of California art, northern or southern. Bischoff and the others (all under 40 at the time) had invested youthful enthusiasm but not mature commitment in abstraction's cause. Moreover, what they retained of nonobjective art proved substantial. Bischoff, Park and Diebenkorn returned to the figure and the landscape without unseating gesture and the materiality of paint as the *sine qua non* of postwar art.

For well over a decade the Bay Area painters generally would present the human body as passive, even leaden; the figure is seemingly lost in thought, gazing out to sea, or paired with another in a silence that at times seems companionable, at times verges on estrangement. When they first appeared, these works, Bischoff's in particular, disappointed critics who expected the figure to return bearing a new package of existential meaning.<sup>1</sup> But Bischoff is emphatically a painter, not a philosopher. He deals not in psychological penetration but in experiences of the visual kind. Ultimately it is the total force of the painted surface, not a face or body, which carries the expressive load. In *Woman on Sofa* (1959) the tarry texture, thick downstrokes of the brush and inky field occupying the top half of the canvas all convey a state of troubled reverie. The woman's face, however, is a near blank, her poised hand a flattened lump of meaty paint. There is no glint in the woman's eye, but a shower of glancing yellow strokes on her sleeve electrifies the composition. In a work by Bischoff the paint forever remains more interesting than the images. It is the artist's own vitality, expressed in the first person, which comes across.

**I**f in Bischoff's figural works we find a suppression of the idiosyncratic qualities and narrative potential usually associated with the human body, in the pure landscapes it is nature animated, dramatized and particularized that the artist offers. With almost carnal strata of pigment he renders, in his smallest and finest landscapes, an equivalent of the paradoxical bulk and delicacy of the northern California hills. Thick, organic sauces of paint course and curl into trees, scrub, rocks and clouds. Flouting



*Breakers, 1953, oil on canvas, 61 by 70 inches.*  
Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,  
University of Texas at Austin.





*Interior with Two Figures, 1968, oil on canvas, 80 inches square.  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Carl D. Lobell.*

**In Bischoff's work the paint forever remains more interesting than the images. It is the artist's own vitality, expressed in the first person, which comes across.**

When the conventional practice of using the heaviest impasto to represent the nearest pictorial elements, Bischoff builds the foreground paint of *Orange Sky* (1958) of suavely measured parallel strokes; by contrast, the distant hillside and sky seem laid on with a trowel. Bischoff emphasizes the independent tangibility of the surface without betraying the composition's rootedness in the scene observed. Less preoccupied with two-dimensional structure than Diebenkorn, less willing to settle for the brute physicality of paint than Park, Bischoff attends to the claims of both perception and pictorial invention.

When the Bay Area painters abandoned pure abstraction they left intact the ethos of Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, Bischoff and his colleagues could stand as the quintessence of Abstract Expressionism's institutionalization of struggle and quest, wrest-

ing free of New York as New York had turned away from Paris. The Bay Area artists changed direction for entirely interior reasons. Recalibrating their art for authenticity's sake, they regained the passion which, as Bischoff later explained, had been waning:

The thing was playing itself dry . . . I can only compare it to the end of a love affair. When I was in the real grips of Abstract Expressionism, the marks and gestures had a hyper-existence. But it was your own passion that inflamed these things, and there was just a gradual loss of this passion.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge-conquest-exhaustion model of artistic progress would stay operative long after the original pitched battles of Abstract Expressionism had turned to faint saber rattling. It provides the key to Bischoff's re-embrace of abstraction in the early '70s, a development that coincided with Guston's fresh interest in the image and a general restoration of the figure in contemporary painting. Going against the current, as he had 20 years earlier, Bischoff explained his separate direction as yet another retooling to get the juices flowing once ardor had cooled into habit: "A revitalization seemed to be in order . . . the figurative painting was getting to be too much of a one-way







No. 85, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 85 by 80 inches.  
Hirsch & Adler Modern.

street, like sitting and talking with a person who doesn't say a goddam word."<sup>3</sup>

**A**bbreviated samplings of Bischoff's early and late abstractions bracket the figural works and landscapes in the current retrospective. A handful of paintings from the late '40s rather perfunctorily documents the artist's change from the then-reigning lingua franca of biomorphic ovoids and Cubist infrastructure to an art of greater gestural openness with paint surfaces so thick the brush leaves treadmarks. One untitled work of 1962, with graffitilike strokes in a vanilla ground, seems a harbinger of things to come.

Still, we are unprepared for the sheer exuberance of the late abstractions. The abandonment of the figure in the 1970s coincided with a switch from oil to acrylic. As if he has literally shed weight, Bischoff spins out jumpy, goofy, zero-gravity compositions, explosions in a cartoon studio which send fur and eyebrows and color charts flying. What seem to be shards of fractured images bounce and roll on choppy patchworks of pigment. The '50s gestures—slow, loving glides and painterly swirls—have given way to a brisk brushiness, the acrylic sometimes wistfully watery and faintly sour, sometimes keen as a pot of grade-school tempera.

The years tell in this recent work, and they tell of a painter fortunate to have escaped the deformations of celebrity and stylistic rigidity. At age 70 it is a new Bischoff we see, perhaps less noble and stalwart than before, but relaxed and humorous, easily renewing his hand at improvisation with no loss or denial of his painter's wisdom. □

1. See, for example, Hilton Kramer, "Month In Review," *Arts*, vol. 34 (Jan. 1960), p. 46.

2. Quoted in Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945-1980*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 62.

3. Quoted in Robert M. Frash, "Figurative Expression and Abstract Concern," *Elmer Bischoff 1947-1985*, Laguna Beach, Calif., Laguna Art Museum, 1986, p. 21.

"Elmer Bischoff 1947-1985" originated last winter at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and was seen recently at the Greenville (S.C.) County Museum of Art (July 8-Aug. 31); it travels to the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (Sept. 20-Nov. 2) and the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, Calif. (Nov. 21-Jan. 4, 1987).

Author: Marcia E. Velroq is associate professor of art history at the University of New Orleans.





# JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY

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by Chiori Santiago

It's difficult to interview Elmer Bischoff, but easy to converse with him. He's reticent about his own life but eager to hear about yours, asking questions as he stirs up two cups of hot Postum in his studio's tiny kitchen. He discusses the latest in kid's toys with the expertise of a father of a 14-year-old son—which he is. Retired this year from the art department of the University of California, Bischoff is far from inactive. Now that he has the time, he spends 10-hour workdays in his studio, and sums up his plans for retirement with one word: Paint.

Bischoff was born in Berkeley in 1916, and since 1959 has kept a studio there, in a converted organ factory hidden above a stretch of downtown car dealerships and medical buildings. In this large, airy space he has produced the paintings and drawings contained in a major retrospective of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art **December 5-February 9**. The show, of course, includes many examples of the work that, along with that of Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and others, became known as the Bay Area figurative school.

Pushing table and chairs around to make a comfortable seating arrangement (all the furniture is on wheels for easy mobility), Bischoff settles back, a calm and gentle Buddha, and retrospects

CS: Looking back, was there a catalyst that inspired the Bay Area figurative school of painting?

EB: Well, after the war there was a great deal of excitement and a sense of purpose. There was a strong feeling of time lost from art. The students at that time seemed to have more

attention, were more focused. The director of the California School of Fine Arts, Doug McAgly, was marvelous; he did a lot in those five years. He was able to pick out people and assemble a group of artists to be teachers who worked well together, but who represented a gamut—and

they had the freedom to teach how they wanted to teach. When I started teaching, it was a long time before anyone even came in to see what I was teaching.

My approach varied with each class and each individual. I played it by ear. I didn't have a

## BISCHOFF



*Yellow Sky*, oil on canvas, 79 5/8" x 98 1/4"

Elmer Bischoff, 1967

Metu Wintu 1975



format.

CS: Was it ever frustrating to spend time teaching when you wanted to paint instead?

EB: No, I've been fortunate to be in situations where there were interesting and lively students. If you don't have that, then it's very depressing. Most of us, as students of art, prepared ourselves to be teachers because that's how you made money, and I made that decision too.

CS: What do you do when a student doesn't have much promise?

EB: The student that doesn't have promise is in a better position than the one who doesn't have interest. The person's own attachment has a lot to do with their success. If they have little promise and a lot of interest, they could turn out to be Van Gogh. I've had students who didn't perform well, and a year later they burst into life. It's really marvelous, and it makes you wary about predicting.

I've heard students say occasionally "I can't wait to get out of school so that I can paint the way I want to paint," as though they were painting to satisfy the instructor. I think that when they get out, they're going to see things the same way, but it's going to be a dealer who's telling them (how to paint).

CS: Did you ever tell yourself you'd do whatever possible to make a living selling your paintings?

EB: No, I never had spectacular talent—I was not a star. There were students way back in Willard (Junior High School), in my class—like Phil J.—who, if you wanted any art work, you called on him. He could do it. I never had that kind of ability. I was never singled out for those virtues.

(continued on page 23)

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## Bischoff, (continued from page 5)

If you had that kind of background, it's possible to think that you could pick and choose a way to paint. But I never had that. I wasn't versatile.

CS: What ever happened to him?

EB: He became a commercial artist and then died young, in an accident.

CS: Do you feel like a star now?

EB: No, I don't feel any different than I did then. I do what I can do. But if you have a commercial art background, I can see how this would make you feel that you could do anything under the sun—paint like Picasso,

Matisse—and that's a very different attitude

toward oneself. Sort of, "have brush will travel." I think (today) there may be too much pressure on students to be ready for the gallery before they're even out of school.

CS: Writers have given you a lot of labels. How would you describe yourself?

EB: What you feel about yourself is very complex—in some ways I feel that I'm successful; in other ways, I feel I should have achieved a lot more. But I do think I have the wisdom and the fortune from the outside world to be able to concentrate on my strengths.

For me, the situation in terms of galleries began to change in '59. Nationally, galleries started to mushroom, more money was being spent. In '59 I got a grant from the Ford Foundation, and a dealer from New York came out with checkbook in hand, and bought a number of things. But this happened for all my friends, too. It was a shared experience.

CS: Thomas Albright wrote that you never worked in a style—when everyone else was doing abstract expressionism, you turned to figurative work. Was this a definite act?

EB: Yes, but it was accompanied by two major responses on my part. The non-representational work that I had been doing had run dry of ideas. Along with that was the very compelling work that David Park was doing. He started doing figurative work first.

CS: Looking back, what works are your favorites?

EB: The work I did after the War—in the '40s, the abstract expressionist pieces—there are not many I'm too keen about. I see them as too derivative, too reflective of other things, and it wasn't until I got into representational figurative that I thought things became more interesting in their own right.

CS: Who influences you now?

EB: There's nothing comparable. Park and I were very close. We exchanged influences, we would give each other criticism. He and I and Diebenkorn went to each other's studios regularly to look at work. There's nothing like that now. ■





# Kaffee klatsch

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*Artists fill up on ideas at weekly breakfasts, join for group show*

By Harriet Swift  
The Tribune

ART

THE LIFE OF an artist is a warm fantasy that almost everyone indulges in at some point or other. Just the word "artist" inspires images of Renoir-like boating parties with artists and models, the camaraderie of New York's legendary Cedar Bar, the semi-official headquarters for the Abstract Expressionists, and the interwoven love lives and philosophies of those wonderful 19th century romance addicts, the Pre-Raphaelites.

Real life for contemporary artists is usually something altogether different from the dream, as they scramble to pay the rent, buy supplies, carve out time from "day jobs" — usually some kind of teaching — to do their art, and take care of the universal minutiae of life, just like everybody else.

The dream of artistic connections, communications, support and the elusive *joie de vivre* does live in one odd corner locally — at Kam's Garden, a no-nonsense Chinese restaurant in downtown Berkeley where a dedicated group of well-known artists meet every Friday at 7 a.m. to talk about art, sports, life and the weather over breakfast.

"It started out as a lunch group," explained Jerome Carlin, the genial figurative painter who started coming in the '70s, "but it took up too much time in the middle of the day, so we shifted it to breakfast."

The group evolved from an informal lunch meeting of art faculty from the University of California at Berkeley. Elmer Bischoff, the painter, is usually credited with starting the group in the early '70s, although he now says that he can no longer remember exactly how it got started.

Friends asked friends to come along and if there was a mutual liking, the guest became a regular. Membership, like everything else about the breakfast group, is completely without rules or planning. The group runs on compatibility and good will.

## A group show

On a recent Friday, practically the entire membership (now somewhere around 15 or 16) showed up at Kam's, eager to discuss their group show, which had opened the weekend before at Holy Names College. It's only the second time that the artists have shown together as a group, and they were pleased with the small-scale exhibition, which includes one or two pieces from each artist.

As more of the group arrived, the Kam's staff began adding more tables. Usually, explained sculptor Sidney Gordin, there were only two tables, with maybe eight or so artists on hand for the weekly gathering.

Friday there were visitors as well and the talk broke into several topics. Painter Charles Strong had brought along an architect friend who was designing a new studio for him in New Mexico. That sparked talk of Taos and Dennis Hopper at that end of the table, while a catalog of a recent Peter Voulkos show was handed around.

The arrival of Joe Slusky, a San Francisco sculptor, was greeted with loud hoots. Slusky, one of the few avowed non-early risers in the group, is always a little late. In fact, he was a hold-out from the lunch-to-breakfast switch.

"It took me a couple of years to get with this breakfast thing," he admitted with a smile.

But now he has gotten with it and, like his fellow breakfast clubbers, finds the effort to get to Berkeley at 7 rewarding.

"This is experiencing art in the historical sense," said Slusky. "You would read about groups like this in college art history courses."

Guillermo Pulido, the youngest member of the group and the most non-traditional artist, made a video about the breakfast club to accompany the Holy Names opening. Pulido echoes Slusky in that being part of the group has enhanced his sense of being an artist.

"This is the first time I felt an opportunity to be a part of a world I had just read about," he said during his video self-interview.

## 'Against bad art'

It was the kind of disagreement that can lead to permanent ruptures, with Loran, the white intellectual, defending his use of the term as legitimate and Monroe, who is black, condemning it as covert racism. Instead, they seem to have agreed to disagree, with Loran no longer using the term in his discussions with Monroe. At the Friday breakfast,

Unlike many artists' groups, past and present, the breakfasters have no common philosophy or dogma of art. In fact, their arguments provide some of their most cherished moments. Charles Strong, who curated the group's first show at Notre Dame College in Belmont a few years ago, thinks the closest he can come to characterizing a group outlook is being "united against bad art."

That, of course, begs the question, what is bad art? Strong considers for a while and finally says, "Well, I don't think Julian Schnabel (the trendy New York painter) would get too many points here."

Painter Matt Phillips, who headed the art department of Bard College before retiring to San Francisco a few years ago, sees his fellow members with a little more detachment than most, having spent most of his career on the East Coast. He doesn't see a dominant theme in their work, but rather an overall belief in "the primacy of paint."

"They believe in that visual language," he says, to convey ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Even the sculptors in the group, Phil-



lips points out, make important use of paint in their work.

Robert Simons, director of the Holy Names gallery and the curator of the show, calls the exhibition a good "cross section of contemporary trends in art," pointing out that the painting styles include abstraction, figurative, landscape and several blends of styles.

Although there's no organized socializing outside of Friday mornings, such as studio visits or gallery trips, the artists seem to have had subtle effects on one another. Pulido credits Erle Loran, who made extensive studies of Cezanne's work, with "reintroducing me" to the French painter.

## Agree to disagree

Loran, who is in his 80s, is one of the group's leading lights, turning impatient with talk of the 49ers ("I've tried to explain to him how Joe Montana is an artist," says his nemesis and 49er fanatic Gordin) and other non-art topics. One of the earliest and most important advocates of African art in the Bay Area, Loran found himself at odds with fellow painter Arthur Monroe over calling tribal work "primitive art."

Monroe pulls up a chair beside Loran and they launch into a conversation, making a neat illustration of the group's much prized give-and-take.

"It's relaxed and informal," says Slusky of the breakfast club's popularity and longevity. "That's the bottom line. It's like, 'Forget aesthetics — let's have breakfast!'"

And so they do.

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**"The Breakfast Group," artwork by Elmer Bischoff, Jerome Carlin, Sidney Gordin, Robert Loberg, Erle Loran, Arthur Monroe, Philip Morsberger, Matt Phillips, Guillermo Pulido, Terry St. John, Peter Shoemaker, Joseph Slusky, Hassel Smith and Charles Strong, is on display at the Kennedy Art Center Gallery of Holy Names College, 3500 Mountain Blvd., Oakland, through March 21. The gallery is open Sunday-Thursday from 1 to 4. Pulido's two-hour video, "The Breakfast Group," may be seen at the gallery. Call 436-1457 for more information.**





# A ROCKRIDGE DIARY

## Recollections of John A. Bischoff, Jr.

Oral History recorded by Andrea Gabriel

*Much of Rockridge's growth occurred around 1910-12 when Fred Reed bought much of the land above Broadway and developed the neighborhood which was once farmland. There were independent builders too, in those early years. John A. Bischoff was an electrician in San Francisco with an aptitude for design and construction. He later moved to the East Bay and built several houses in Berkeley and Rockridge between 1910 and 1937.*

*On a sunny but windy March day, I walked to a modest house off of Chabot Road to interview the eldest son of John Bischoff — John A. Bischoff, Jr. I was met at the door by a soft spoken, slightly built energetic man in his mid 70's. At his suggestion, we drove around Rockridge in his white Vega. Having a keen eye for well designed and constructed houses, he pointed out those houses which his father built, or those which he liked, or those which triggered a memory. In between, he revealed a bit of his own history.*

*What follows is a portion of our interviews. Some of the questions have been reordered in this published version for clarity.*

—A.G.

*We begin our tour by looking at a house his father built on Presley Way, head down Chabot Road and over to the magnificent Victorian house situated on the corner of Hudson and Shafter.*

*Gabriel: Now this is a nice street [Presley Way]. There are some beautiful homes here.*

*Bischoff: [Pointing to a nice gray house trimmed in white with a pale pink Japanese Magnolia just starting to bloom in the front yard] My father built that in 1931.*

*Gabriel: Do you remember what this street looked like [then]?*

*Bischoff: It was pretty well built up.*

*Gabriel: Was it common for a contractor or someone like your father to build several houses on one block?*

*Bischoff: He did that; what others did, I don't know. In his younger days he would build a whole string of houses.*

*Gabriel: Do you know what year most of these houses on lower Chabot were built?*

*Bischoff: I would say roughly 1915.*

*We stop on Hudson at Shafter and admire the large, pale cream-colored Victorian. It has dark brown trim and its "gingerbread" decoration recalls another era. There is a large hardwood tree in the front yard; palm trees in the rear. The grounds take up half a block on Hudson.*

*Bischoff: See, here it is. I was always fascinated [by it] as a child. See, this is Shafter Avenue, and we lived on Shafter when I started first grade — it changes over, turning into what they call Keith Avenue — but this was all Shafter and it had the train tracks on it.*

*The basement windows are nicely cut so it looks like a legitimate basement, and the attic up there — I guess it's four stories, four floors showing as windows.*

*Gabriel: The palms are beautiful too. It looks sort of out of place, don't you think? — so massive. The houses around it look much smaller in comparison.*

*Bischoff: Oh, yes. Oh well, I'm sure if you saw this when it was first built, there was nothing around, then gradually it sold off. They raise prices on the property so much that people don't want to hold it so they sell off. It would cost a fortune to build something like that now. They'll have houses just that big, but they're going to be cement — not going to have any that look like works of art.*

*Gabriel: Now the house that you lived in on Shafter, is that still here or was that torn down by the freeway?*

*Bischoff: No, it wasn't torn down by the freeway. Right next*

*door to it is the firehouse and they tore it down for the firehouse, and the schoolgrounds were expanded.*

*Gabriel: You went to Claremont School?*

*Bischoff: Yes, I started [there]. I was there about two and a half years [from the] first grade. Of course, it's [the original school] been all torn down. It had to be earthquake proof, so they tore it down. It was built in 1913 and stood up all those years, but tear it down!*

*The next leg of our journey takes us up College Avenue to Harwood —where his father built several houses — winding up Florio and Mystic, crossing Claremont.*

*Bischoff: This next street will be Harwood Avenue. Now this place right here [a large "four-plex" white apartment building with red trim], my father built and we moved in there the Christmas of 1914.*

*Gabriel: Did you like that place?*

*Bischoff: Oh, as a child you like everything [laughter]. I would say I like everything. When they took me over to Shafter and put me in school, I didn't like that!*

*Gabriel: As he built things, would he move [your family] into a place?*

*Bischoff: No, not particularly. Actually, he was building a place on Russell Street and this was an intermediate move. He knew we weren't going to stay here. Then we moved in [to Russell Street] and I lived there for 58 years.*

*Gabriel: Were you sad to give up that house? [Russell Street]*

*Bischoff: No, and the reason I wasn't — maybe fate fixed it so I wouldn't be sad — the vandalism became a terror. I think of it — how glad I am that my mother and father weren't around to see that.*

*Starting right here [Auburn Avenue] right down to the end, my father built all those.*

*Gabriel: Are you amazed at the cost of houses these days?*

*Bischoff: Oh, that's... outrageous. My father sold that house [points to a modest house on the corner of Auburn and Harwood] for \$6,500 and I don't know what it sold for recently but I know that the real estate woman that sold my place on Russell Street had it for sale for \$200,000. Isn't that outrageous?*

*Gabriel: When did he build that?*

*Bischoff: Oh, that would be about 1912 to 1915.*

*Mr. Bischoff points out many houses built by his father. Almost all have a nice porch, one a Spanish style tiled roof, another a plain slate roof. As we creep along Harwood admiring*





the homes, a curious mother and her children eye us. She inquires if we are waiting for her. Clearly, he is proud of his father's work; he answers,

Bischoff: No, we were just talking about old houses. My father built that house, oh, way back about 1912. That apartment building back where the street curves? — I lived in that when I was three years old! My father built that too!

On to Eton Avenue and there is a large, pale yellow apartment building on a corner. Two white columns support a balcony with large arched windows — another of Mr. Bischoff's buildings. We pass other buildings of his on Lewiston at Alcatraz, then back across Claremont. Heading up "The Uplands", down El Camino, a narrow winding street where large, beautiful houses are slapped next together, almost on top of one another.

We slow as we approach a garage on El Camino and I see, as we follow on to Domingo, that the garage is part of an enormous home — pale salmon colored, with a red tiled roof — which rambles down the hill to Domingo. It is a magnificent home. We pass by it on to Plaza Drive on our way out back across Claremont to Alcatraz.

Bischoff: Now here, see the back of this house?

Gabriel: Yes, it's big! Is that one house? Actually there's an entrance on one street [El Camino] and an entrance on the other street [Domingo]?

Bischoff: Yes. Do you like that? My father built that! The people's name was Kaufmann — he built it for them. They asked him to build a house.

Gabriel: Is that your favorite one that he built?

Bischoff: It probably is. See this house here? [Points to a slate grey two story house, with a white picket fence on Plaza.] Do you like that? In 1931 I went to a party there — a coming out party for a girl, April 1931.

Gabriel: Did you have a good time at the party?

Bischoff: I think so. I played the piano!

We drive to Russell Street where he lived for 58 years in the house his father built. It is a deep coral color with many, many windows and a lot of ornately decorated trim. I ask about his father's work.

Gabriel: Would your father buy the land and then build a house on it and sell?

Bischoff: Yes, he'd buy the property first.

Gabriel: Would he have several people working on the

house with him?

Bischoff: Oh yes, he always had a team working — about five, but he did all the designing and construction. Laying out the plans, that was all his.

Gabriel: Would you go the visit your father sometime when he was working on these houses?

Bischoff: Oh yes!

Gabriel: Did your father have a particular design that made his style distinctive?

Bischoff: No. Very often he'd have something that wasn't typical. He'd put things in as a surprise. The door with these slashes [three long thin window panes in a door], he'd use things like that.

Gabriel: Well, you can be proud of your father's work, can't you? You can drive around and see [his work].

Bischoff: Oh yes. There's no doubt he was born with an exceptional talent.

On our way back to Rockridge, we pass some stores on College Avenue above Ashby and Mr. Bischoff tells me that his father built some of those, too. We turn onto Claremont near Brookside Drive — Brookside curves behind Claremont — a short block where two houses now sit.

Bischoff: See that? Well, when I was a child, it was all one big private estate — just a beautiful estate — a big, old fashioned, many-storied house. Fiat was the name. Anyway, I went in there once when I had absolutely no business in there, except that I looked in there and there was a little bridge and a pond going underneath the bridge. I went in there and you could see the goldfish. Alexander came up — his father and mother owned the estate. [He] was on a pony and he ran the pony right up to me and said, "What are you doing here? You don't belong here, this is my property!" [Laughter]

Of course it was true — all very true. But the part I didn't like was the pony. I guess the pony was harmless, but the pony kept pressure on. That was my only recollection. I told him [Alexander] I was looking at the fish!

Gabriel: How old were you when this happened?

Bischoff: I was eight.

Gabriel: What did you do, what did you say when he ran up?

Bischoff: I don't know. I'm sure I told him I was looking at the fish and I don't know whether he said, "Go look at some other fish!" [Laughter] If Alexander's alive, I guess he wishes they held it together. You can imagine what it's worth now!



















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